They Can Because They Think They Can

Richard T. Vacca

Thirty-something years ago, at the age of 23, I began full-time doctoral studies at Syracuse University. I had just completed my third year as a high school English teacher. Throughout my brief tenure as a public school teacher, I was continually perplexed about why my students, many of whom were at risk of school failure, seemed helpless in the face of reading. My concern for these struggling students led me to pursue doctoral studies in the field of reading, focusing mainly on adolescent learners. My motivation for studying reading was to better understand why older students who struggled with text found it difficult to view themselves as readers and to use reading to learn.

Not far into the doctoral program, however, I found myself struggling with reading—and doubting my ability to read academic materials—in the same ways that my students had. Although I could read a best-selling novel with ease in five or six hours, I found myself taking similar amounts of time to read a single assigned chapter from one of my statistics and research methods textbooks—only to come up short in understanding what I had read. I soon eschewed altogether reading texts that defied my comprehension in favor of taking copious notes in class and participating in study groups. Without the spur of motivation, struggling students stand less chance of becoming engaged readers.

During my first year of doctoral study, I often wondered why I had ever left the classroom. Was I out of my league? Not as smart or as wise as my fellow doctoral students, who in many cases were a decade or two older than I? On more than one occasion, I thought about quitting and returning to classroom teaching, at which I had been successful. To encourage me to stay with it, my wife, Jo Anne, hung an inspirational poster prominently in my study area. The poster showed several seagulls flying effortlessly across the sea above a caption from the ancient Roman poet Virgil: “They can because they think they can.” Whenever I felt like caving into the pressures of doctoral study, I looked to the poster for confidence and inspiration.

What I know now that I didn’t know then is that self-efficacy and text comprehension are situational. That is, the emotional and cognitive demands placed on a reader vary according to the subject matter that the reader is tackling. Whether or not a reader feels confident that he or she has the skills to handle a given reading situation makes a difference in that reader’s approach. Bandura (1986) explains that self-efficacy refers to “people’s judgment of their abilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performance” (p. 391). Self-efficacy is an “I can” belief in oneself that leads to a sense of competence. Self-efficacy is less concerned with the text comprehension strategies that students bring to content-reading tasks than with their judgments of what they can do.

Although I easily and competently read fiction, I experienced difficulty when I tried to comprehend technical material that might as well have been...
written in a foreign language. I lacked the confidence to read statistical text and research methodology at the beginning of my doctoral program, and that lack of confidence threatened both my motivation and my reading comprehension. Over time, I developed competence in reading these kinds of texts—and confidence in my ability to do so. Explicit instruction in reading comprehension strategies is essential to bringing struggling readers along. But without a sense of competence, students will have a hard time digging into enough positive reading experiences to get the practice they’ll need to internalize those strategies.

**Self-Efficacy and Text Comprehension**

Uncertainty, coupled with lack of strategy, subverts too many struggling readers’ ability to comprehend text. When middle or high school students approach content-area reading assignments, some feel confident in their ability to pull off the task, but many others feel clueless about how to successfully comprehend the text.

Self-efficacy and text comprehension are not only situational but also interrelated, and motivation is related to both elements. If students believe, for example, that they have a good chance of succeeding at understanding what they are reading, then they are likely to be more motivated to engage in reading and to persevere. Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) call for “a reading engagement model” that underscores the importance of both increasing students’ motivation to read and providing instruction in comprehension strategies and social interaction in the classroom.

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**Strategies to Increase Engagement**

One of the realities facing teachers across all content areas today is that many students either read at a superficial level to answer homework questions or find ways to circumvent reading altogether. When I was tempted to take the avoidance path as a graduate student, I was fortunate to have the family support and personal motivation to keep me going and help me develop workable strategies. Educators need to give struggling readers the same kind of boost by increasing their motivation to comprehend texts and introducing students to a variety of comprehension strategies. Effective research-based comprehension strategies include question generation, question-answering routines, comprehension monitoring, cooperative learning, summarization, graphic organizers, and familiarity with different text structures.

To use any comprehension strategy effectively, students need to focus their attention on the reading task at hand. Simply assigning them a text for homework or in-class discussion won’t necessarily guarantee that they will attend to the reading task with the focus needed for effective comprehension. In fact, the opposite may be the case. Students with low self-efficacy can easily become discouraged with the task before they even start if their only motivation is to fulfill an assignment. Once into reading, these students’ minds will quickly wander from the reading task if the text holds no inherent interest for them, if they read without purpose, or if they fail to make personal connections with the material as they are reading. If students lack engagement with texts, they are unlikely to tap into whatever reading strengths and strategies they possess.
What teachers do before assigning students a text is an integral part of instruction in content-centered literacy lessons. Teachers are in a better position to increase students' motivation if they activate learners' background knowledge and get students thinking about the topic before they begin to read. Prereading instructional strategies often involve arousing curiosity about the topic, evoking predictions and creating anticipation for reading, presenting problems to be solved through reading, or eliciting student-generated questions about the material before assigning a particular text (Vacca & Vacca, 2005).

**Using Real-Life Motivators**

**Name That Snake**

A personal anecdote can be a powerful instructional tool that establishes a personal context in which readers can interact with new information. For example, a middle school science teacher I taught in one of my graduate-level education courses used a real-life situation that he had encountered to pique his students' interest before assigning research about snakes as part of a unit on reptiles. While looking for a parking spot, the teacher had noticed a flyer posted on a telephone pole, reading:

**SNAKE FOUND**
**SUNDAY, OCTOBER 24**
**ON INDIANA AVENUE**
**PLEASE CALL 262-9415**
**DESCRIBE TO CLAIM**

The science teacher retrieved the flyer to use as a motivational tool in his students' study of snakes. Before he even assigned reading materials, the teacher recounted to students how he had come across the flyer en route to a college football game. While looking for a parking spot, the teacher had noticed a flyer posted on a telephone pole, reading:

**Connecting reading material to students’ lives activates student motivation.**

students, “If you were to make a telephone call in response to the flyer, what would you need to know about the lost snake in order to describe it and claim it?” This led to discussion in which students raised such questions as, “Is it a pet snake or a wild snake?” and “What does the snake look like?” The class decided that the snake had to be someone's pet, especially if it had been found near a college campus in an urban area.

To tap students' background knowledge, the teacher then started a discussion about what kinds of snakes make good pets. Once students were curious and motivated to solve the problem, they formed collaborative groups, each conducting a purposeful search for information about various kinds of pet snakes. The teacher, working with the school librarian, had gathered together various resource books about snakes for the student teams to use in their research. In addition to books, student teams were encouraged to use the Internet to find information about pet snakes. After researching the topic, each team had to choose one kind of snake to describe in detail. The teacher then had students role-play the telephone conversation that might occur if they called to claim the snake.

This science teacher followed a reading engagement model to involve students in an active, purposeful, and thoughtful search for text information about snakes. From a strategy perspective, students were engaged in thinking about texts before, during, and after reading.

**Creating Hooks to Students’ Lives**

Using an analogy that connects reading material to students' lives is another way to activate student motivation. Mathison (1989) suggested that analogies provide "cognitive hooks" on which to hang new ideas. These hooks help students look at their past experiences and existing knowledge in new ways.

For example, consider a high school English teacher who is beginning a unit on Shakespeare by introducing students to the importance of theater in the lives of people during Shakespeare's time. The teacher might make an analogy between modern moviegoers and theatergoers in the Elizabethan era.

The teacher might lead into this analogy with a general question like "What did you do this weekend for fun?" or "Did anyone see a movie this weekend?" and follow up with questions to determine why students went to see a given movie at the local theater or rented a popular DVD. Responses undoubtedly will vary from "Because we heard it was funny" to "Everyone else was going." The discussion stem-
ming from these questions will help students recognize that today's movies affect their lives in ways similar to the way plays affected people's lives 500 or more years ago. The class might reflect on key differences in customs: For example, people in Elizabethan days gathered outside their homes for live entertainment, whereas movie lovers today can watch movies or even filmed plays at home. To complete the discussion, the teacher might show a brief clip from the movie Shakespeare in Love to give students a sense of Elizabethan life and a visual image of the Globe Theatre.

Flight Conditions
To paraphrase Virgil, students can read potentially difficult text if they think they can. When students feel certain that they can master the material they are facing, even those students for whom reading rarely comes smoothly stand a better chance at achieving that mastery. Reading may never become as effortless for us as flying across the sea is for seagulls. But if we provide situations in which students feel both motivated and competent, even daunting texts will have no chance of grounding them.

References

Richard T. Vacca is Past President of the International Reading Association and Emeritus of Literacy Education at Kent State University; rvacca@kent.edu.