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THE IMPACT OF STRONG READING AND WRITING SKILLS ON STUDENT'S LITERACY

Nowadays many students approach reading and writing with trepidation: for quite a few it is a place of endless frustration over their spelling, grammar, and punctuation issues when it should be a place to communicate ideas.

Even though spelling, grammar, and punctuation are important, they should not take the forefront of a writing class – good spelling, grammar, and punctuation will not help you if you have nothing to say: thus, the former are mere tools for good writing but quite useless otherwise.

Students approach academic reading with similar attitudes: it is far removed from their own lives and it is incomprehensible, full of language and references they don't understand and can't relate to. Similarly, reading "The Great Gatsby" and "Breakfast at Tiffany's" at age fifteen, compared to reading them at the age of twenty alters our perspective on life itself. In discussing these key literacy experiences,

students can then begin to see the real impact reading and writing have had on their lives and therefore the importance of continuing to expand their literacy experiences. These are the tools they will benefit from having in their future, and, consequently, are a good investment of time for the future of the class and the students' future educations.

Many students at the initial stage of reading and writing do not understand the importance of academic reading and writing, seeing it as of little value outside of school. As a result, it becomes the job of the instructor to convince them of their importance and of what strong reading and writing skills will do for students. For example, some direct connections are made in the research between an academic vocabulary base – derived from strong reading and writing skills – and academic success, career advancement, economic security, and ultimately quality of life. When students hear these statistics, many – not necessarily all – begin to pay attention.

Another reason why many students dread academic reading and writing is that they associate it with endless struggle with comma placement and fill-in-the-blank exercises. By drawing back and demonstrating through discussion, brainstorm activities, peer review, and other group exercises that academic reading and writing are first and foremost the communication of ideas – ranging from the funny and trivial to the serious and profound – students begin to become more enthusiastic about getting these skills. The discussion of spelling and punctuation can take place in later drafts.

Another important element of a successful reading and writing class is that students feel free to share ideas without fear of being ridiculed or censured. A class with this kind of safe feeling is called a learning community, where everyone, including the teacher, feels safe to both teach and learn. Students who feel free to communicate with each other, remain respectful, and help each other is the sign of a true learning community. Through peer assessment they can learn to communicate their ideas and teach each other tolerance and patience.

Another method to get students excited and motivated to write is to showcase their work. Writing, again, is ultimately an act of communication with another. It may be compared to diary-keeping: Some attempt since their childhood to keep a diary and each time quit, either forgetting about it or eventually seeing it as futile. Why bother if no one is reading it? We can only talk to ourselves for so long. This is how many students feel about writing: why bother if it is only for a grade and an instructor who is only reading because it is their job? As the students' probable viewpoint may be. But if students are given a sense of audience, then the purpose becomes clearer. This sense of audience can be created in numerous ways. For example, any student would feel a real sense of pride and validation when the instructor reads bits of their writing aloud to the class as examples (not including the name, of course). Working in peer groups, and sharing one's essays and ideas, also creates a sense of

audience. When writing something today, for example, we envision what our own writing group's response would be, and this eliminates some false or unclear places in the writing.

So, beyond telling students, "You need this course to graduate," the teacher should learn to motivate reluctant academic readers and writers.