

Teaching Students to LOVE Literacy

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Abstract

Literacy skills are a crucial part of any students' education and determine success in various core subject areas. The goal is for students to be fully literate, and to do this, they must have the ability to communicate and acquire new knowledge. Teachers often fail to use the knowledge and interests that students bring with them to the classroom. After their primary years, students often struggle with motivation in the area of literacy. This chapter explores the merging of academic language and literacy with social and environmental language and digital resources. The ability to motivate students and address the current disconnect of developing and enhancing basic literacy skills are cleverly shared through the acronym "LOVE" (Learning, Opportunity, Value, Enhancement), based on the Teaching Students to L.O.V.E. Literacy presentation and book, 29 Days to L.O.V.E. Literacy (2016).

Keywords: motivation, literacy,

Introduction

The weak connection between the literacy skills that are taught in school and those which students use within their everyday culture (consisting of interaction with friends face-to-face, texting, and social media) is the reason why many of our students lack the required skills necessary for academic success. When discussing the connection that teachers should make with students in academic language development, Himmele and Himmele (2009) noted, "For teachers to increase exposure to academic language, it's important that they develop a mind-set in which they see almost any verbal interaction as an opportunity for developing academic language" (para. 2). There can be a huge disconnect when formal academic language and literacy is taught to a student population whose daily conversations consist of acronyms such as "lol," "idk," and "ily" to define thoughts, emotions, and actions.

However, students explore language everyday—teachers must make them aware of it and show them that knowledge and informal language is not too distant from the formal academic knowledge required in today's classrooms.

Motivating with L.O.V.E.

Parents are often overwhelmed with determining the best methods to teach their child to read and write, and in many cases educators face the daunting task of "teaching to the test." Students can experience disconnect, and therefore lack the relevance of the material in which they are learning. To promote student engagement with reading and literacy and to build positive attitudes toward literacy learning, teachers must understand student needs. Motivation to build upon and learn new skills is critical. Cambria and Guthrie (2010) shared that motivation for reading (literacy) should contain three elements: (1) interest (2) dedication, and

(3) confidence (p. 16). “Teaching Students to L.O.V.E Literacy” was designed to provide a framework for strategies that foster a love for learning the required academic literacy skills by empowering parents and teachers to “think outside the box” on ways to connect real-world skills with literacy tasks. “L.O.V.E. Literacy” began as a daily Twitter feed to share simple techniques with teachers and parents that could be implemented swiftly into a curriculum, as well as daily routines and practice at home. Whether in the classroom or at home, students need activities that are focused on L.O.V.E (Learning, Opportunities, Value, and Enhancement). This chapter provides details on how to achieve “L.O.V.E.” in literacy learning for students while maintaining the development of traditional literacy skills.

Learning

Many parents lack knowledge in the academic skills required of today’s students as it relates to literacy. Educators often teach skills in isolation or at a surface level. Parents and teachers frequently try to spark the passion of literacy learning too late for some students. Literacy learning should involve motivation, repetition (multiple and varied exposure to assignments and lessons), and innovation. Literacy learning should provide “opportunities to explore concepts,” familiar and unfamiliar (Childs, 2016, p. 3). The literacy journey should be exploratory and prescriptive on a case-by-case basis, as “it is much easier for a child to become an early reader if he has enjoyed being an emerging one and feels confident with his growing skills” (Almon & Miller, 2009, p. 34).

Opportunity

A strong literacy foundation promotes exposure to additional opportunities in education. A literate child is given the opportunity to explore creative works and can produce and use their skill set to work with many different subjects and tasks. The learning of literacy skills allows a student the opportunity to “transcend and explore the world and their surroundings” (Childs, 2016, p. 3). Literacy

learning is a complex process that is often complicated further by misconceptions. There is often the mindset that literacy learning must be a formal process, but listening, speaking, reading, and writing opportunities are everywhere. Improving student literacy and the process of “why” we read, write, and communicate is a learning opportunity, and the “whys” provide teachable moments that are often missed. It is important to note that as educators and parents, it is necessary to find ways to bridge academic literacy and social literacy skills. Literacy is foundational to all academic content areas, and because of this, there is a wide range and means to reach and to develop literate emergence and eventually fluency in students. A focus on literacy builds a foundation in all areas of content knowledge.

Value

Comprehension of text, including inferencing skills and drawing conclusions, should not be limited to a reading passage or a standardized test. Literature connections across all content areas should be weaved into curriculum. In addition, the promotion of parent interaction and support during reading is important. Literacy should be a valued stepping stone to a vast field of knowledge.

Students retain information that is appreciated and applicable. They also learn by using their knowledge repeatedly in their own unique environmental settings. Acquiring literacy skills is a process in which students should have ownership. Students need opportunities that provide “continuity between the rich contexts of home and school literacy practices,” (Neuman & Roskos, 1997, p. 31) which would enhance their “multiple literacy capabilities” (p. 31). Students must see the value of skills they are learning in school. For example, grammar and writing instruction must be relevant and reflect the importance of clear and concise communication in academia, the workplace, and in everyday life. Providing value requires teaching students beyond basic skills. Students should see literacy as a tool to

communicate-- there are few careers and situations in their lives in which weak communication skills are acceptable.

Enhancement

Literacy learning in the early stages of development is full of exciting, well-planned lessons and resources for young, eager learners. However, due to rigorous curriculum requirements, a lack of resources, as well as demographic and environmental factors, we often let students slip through the cracks. Children who are poor readers at the end of first grade will most likely be poor readers at the end of fourth grade (Juel, 1988; Lonigan, Burgess, & Anthony, 2000). Students often get to what they “feel” is a fluent stage in reading and fail to develop further. Continual efforts must be made to understand students’ habits and enhance their prior knowledge, by building upon their schema—otherwise, students will continue to suffer.

Literacy learning should be an experience that builds and enhances a student’s natural abilities. Writing, reading, speaking, and listening are skills that can be forever fine-tuned (and students must be aware of this). Once literacy skills are fluent (usually happens around 4th grade), students often hit a “slump” (Chall, 1983, 1996), as they are expecting to be able to access information independently for learning purposes. Students could avoid this slump with instruction that incorporates technology, builds an extensive vocabulary, and personalizes instruction to enhance learning. Lastly, to enhance lessons and learning, the skills students are taught should not be isolated, but instruction should reflect a clear, guided, and integrated approach that provides motivation and challenges.

Activities

Teaching Students to L.O.V.E Literacy was created to empower parents and educators to rethink the way literacy skills and lessons are presented to students. Through an interactive

session format, five activities were shared with conference attendees that focused on learning, opportunities, value, and enhancement (L.O.V.E). Each participant that attended the session was given the opportunity to collaborate with a partner or group of educators that teach or work in a similar educational background, and they were challenged to adapt or create a new activity inspired by the ideas in the book, *29 Days to L.O.V.E. Literacy* (Childs, 2016).

Hearing It (Learning and Opportunity)

Close reading has been a very “hot” topic in recent years. To provide better interest and to create fun while reading aloud, attendees were challenged to have their child/student put a spin on close reading with digital tools. Instead of simply re-reading for understanding, have students use a tool such as the Adobe Spark application (available on smartphones, desktops, and tablets) to record and work through the purpose of the reading, the arrangement of the text, and specific vocabulary words. Using the application, students can record their voice to provide narration, text, pictures, or illustrations. As a bonus, the Adobe Spark website (<https://spark.adobe.com/>) and application have recently been upgraded with a function that allows the user to create web stories, which could be turned into blogs (Childs, 2016, p. 12).

Exploring Lyrics (Value)

Move beyond using music to get learners to memorize facts or concepts. Songs may extend beyond therapeutic and catchy; they can also be used to develop literacy skills. From modern day pop, to classic rock, to “doo wop,” the lyrics of a song can be used to learn concepts such as tone, mood, vocabulary, theme, and comprehension. For example, a student could write a critical analysis of a song’s lyrics and then share and compare their perspective with another person or even an audience. For younger students, use lyrics or specific songs to teach emotions or adjectives that are newly introduced in a piece of text (Childs, 2016, p. 14).

Career-Related Literacy Skills (Value)

Explore which literacy skills are required for certain careers. Students often do not see how their learning transcends past the classroom. Educators and parents should share the influence of literacy skills and how it will become a part of daily life once formal schooling has ended. Help your child/student to gain an understanding that literacy not only affects them in the classroom, but also in their future career and employment settings. Even those entering basic entry-level job positions require strong literacy skills such as reading, writing, and communicating directions to customers and clients.

When working with students on career ties to literacy skills, begin by having your child/student brainstorm a list of jobs and career settings on a piece of paper. On the opposite side, have them write down specific literacy skills needed for each job. This activity could be done with younger children or second language learners by illustrating a predetermined list of literacy tasks that are used in specific jobs. If done in a classroom, this task could be charted and used as a comparison between different careers. There are websites for kids (grades K-8) out there to help search career-related information (Childs, 2016, p. 18).

Poetry and Lyrics (Enhance)

Share with students the connection of the genre of poetry and how it relates to music. Teach students/children to L.O.V.E. Literacy by having them write a poem or song lyric. Have your child/student write a poem about love. Students often get confused and frustrated with the poetry genre. It does not have to be about “romantic” love, but love in a caring and endearing manner. Poems used with students could be as simple as writing an acrostic or a haiku, or a couplet—whatever allows them to explore language, vocabulary, and communication. If you choose to use song lyrics instead of poetry, use lyrics (pre-screened) that have already been developed, and use them to teach specific elements such as mood, word

choice, adjectives, patterns and sentence structure. (Childs, 2016, p. 24)

Journals and Blogs, Oh My! (Enhance)

Students blog or vlog daily via social media using apps such as Facebook (www.facebook.com) and Tumblr (www.Tumblr.com). Show students the connection between what they write and academic writing used in school settings. Getting students to understand writing structure begins with having them write about topics that they know well and topics they enjoy discussing.

Familiarity rules—students like writing about what is familiar. Family, friends and their environment are what they know about the most. Invite your child or student to write at least once per week about topics related to their experiences in their family and friendships. This writing exercise could be compiled in a journal, or you could create a personal blog of some sort (check privacy settings). When in a classroom setting (with parent permission), feature the stories of students in an area where others can view them (be mindful not to share confidential information). For teachers, there are children’s social networking sites such as Edmodo (www.edmodo.com) that can assist with classroom blogging and building online classroom communities (Childs, 2016, p. 26).

Conclusion

The literacy skills that students learn is groundwork for everything else they will encounter in school and life. Although literacy has its traditional academic definitions and functions, ways in which we build and reach students in literacy education needs some work. Reading and writing are used to increase knowledge and to communicate.

With 92 percent of students reporting “daily” online activities and 24 percent of students saying they are online “almost constantly” (Pew Research Center, 2015), literacy has taken on new shapes and forms as each day passes. “As more educators

incorporate social media in the classroom, they have needed to seek out new— and old— teaching and learning theories for incorporating the technology in pedagogically meaningful ways” (Blaschke, 2014). The need to reach students with technology may increase student engagement and abilities.

Educators and all stakeholders must understand the need to focus on continual development of literacy and its importance to vast functions in life. We must move beyond the process of sharing with students “how to

read” (although very important), and share the value of “why to read.” Students are comfortable with using technology (for socialization and entertainment) but have not yet mastered the art of merging technology with gaining academic knowledge in the area of literacy. The hope in creating and sharing the “L.O.V.E Literacy” message, presentation, and activities is to continue to build a world of readers, writers, and thinkers who appreciate literacy in all forms and respect the importance of such a valuable skill.

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