How literacy tasks influence children’s motivation for literacy

The most reliable indicator of motivation for literacy learning is not the type of reading program that districts follow, but the actual daily tasks that teachers provide in their classrooms.

It is 10:45 on Tuesday morning, time for first-grade literacy instruction.

Mike’s teacher has just completed a lesson on rhyming words and has distributed two worksheets to the children for practice in decoding. Mike glances at the first worksheet requiring him to use rhyming words to complete a sentence. He quickly decodes the word choices, Jam, ham, and Sam, and places them in the sentence blanks, Sam put grape jam on his ham. Then he moves on to a worksheet on short u. He begins by coloring and cutting. Fifteen minutes later, he is still laboriously decorating cups, tubs, and other objects on the sheet. When the teacher reminds the children that they have only 5 minutes left for morning work, he hurriedly matches several pictures to words on the worksheet and hands it in. Later, when asked what he was supposed to learn that morning, Mike replied, “vowels.” When queried about why vowels were a good thing to learn, he shrugged his shoulders with an “I don’t know.”

Across the hall, the teacher is reading Clifford’s Birthday Party (Bridwell, 1988) and discussing plans for celebrating his birthday in class. On easel paper, she lists various activities and labels each one as “reading,” “writing,” “planning,” or “thinking.” One of the activities, writing a story about Clifford, is required. But students may choose other activities that include writing invitations to Clifford’s party, making a list of the needed preparations, designing and writing a birthday card for Clifford, following directions to make Clifford’s cake, and reading and listening to other Clifford stories.

Lauren takes out paper to begin her story, thinks for a while, then asks Susan about her plans. Susan replies, “When Clifford goes swimming.” Lauren suggests that it would be funny if he got everyone wet, then begins to write, saying the words as she writes them. Unable to spell a word, she walks to the easel where some Clifford books are displayed. She copies the word and continues writing. Several minutes later, she asks if Megan knows how to spell house. Together they construct a phonetic approximation, hos. When she finishes, she reads her story to Megan, then makes two changes. When asked what she was supposed to learn from this activity, Lauren replied,
"What Clifford does, and why he is funny." When pressed about why this might be a good thing, she answered, "I want to be an author when I grow up."

What distinguishes how Mike and Lauren approach, engage in, and understand their literacy activities? It is not ability; both are average readers. Nor is it experience, because both own books and have enjoyed them with their families. The biggest difference between these two children is their classroom literacy contexts, specifically the activities they complete during literacy instruction. Although both are progressing as readers and writers, they are developing different conceptions of literacy from their classroom tasks.

Mike understands that his instructional work is important and that he must do it accurately, neatly, and turn it in on time. He is pleased to get frequent stickers and gold stars on his papers and thinks he is a good reader. However, he is often bored by the rote nature of his work and completes it quickly with little thought.

Lauren, on the other hand, thinks about her work, plans, and discusses it with others. She visualizes how literacy will play a part in her future. She is effortful and she tries a variety of strategies as she works. She is seldom bored because her classroom offers choices that are challenging, meaningful, and related to her interests. Although Lauren wants the teacher to evaluate her work positively, she also strives to meet her own standards of quality.

In this article, we discuss how classroom tasks affect students' motivation for literacy. We propose that tasks influence students' affect, such as desire to read and write, under-
standing of the goals of literacy, and self-regulation as readers and writers. We illustrate our proposition with examples gathered during a study of motivation for literacy in 12 classrooms of 6-year-olds (6 integrated language-arts and 6 skills-based) (Turner, in press). The first author observed 84 children during literacy instruction over 5 days in each classroom. After observations, students were interviewed to determine their understanding of and value for literacy.

**Open tasks provide challenge, choice, student control over learning, opportunities to collaborate with others and to construct meaning through reading and writing.**

A variety of other data were gathered to provide as complete a picture of classroom instruction as possible. These included daily field notes, verbatim transcripts of literacy lessons, and descriptions of all the tasks the children completed. Literacy tasks were classified as open or closed. In open tasks, students were in control of both the products they created and the processes they employed. There was no one correct answer, nor was there a specified procedure to use. Open tasks required students to set goals, select and organize information, choose strategies, and assess the final results. For example, if students were composing, they decided what information about the topic interested them, how to organize it to create a theme, and what they wanted the final message to be. Because there were many “correct” answers to open tasks, students approached tasks as problems to solve rather than as exercises to complete.

Closed tasks were those in which either the product (e.g., there is one correct answer), the process (e.g., sound out the word), or both were specified. For example, in many worksheet activities, students were given cloze sentences and directed to fill in the blanks with selected vocabulary words. Closed tasks afforded students fewer opportunities to control their learning and explore their interests because these tasks did not permit students to make choices and decisions.

The major finding of the study was that the most reliable indicator of motivation was not the type of reading program that districts follow, but the actual daily tasks that teachers provided students in their classrooms. Tasks that provided opportunities for students to use reading and writing for authentic purposes (like reading trade books and composing), that conveyed the value of literacy for communication and enjoyment, and that allowed students to be actively involved in constructing meanings and metacognitions about literacy were most successful in motivating students.

**Creating contexts for motivation**

Why did open-ended tasks have such a powerful effect on students’ engagement? We can summarize the influence of open tasks on students’ motivation with six Cs, an easy mnemonic to remember critical features of motivating tasks (e.g., Ames, 1992; Lepper & Hodell, 1989). First, open-ended tasks allow students to make personal choices among literacy activities. Second, these activities provide challenge for all students. Third, they allow students to take control over their own learning through planning, evaluation and self-monitoring. Fourth, they foster the sharing of expertise through collaboration. Fifth, open activities foster constructive comprehension or making meaning through reading and writing. Sixth, the consequences of open activities promote feelings of competence and efficacy. In the sections that follow, we describe how teachers can use these characteristics of open tasks as a guide for designing literacy activities that engage and support their students’ learning.

**Choice**

Research has shown that choice is a powerful motivator. When students can choose tasks and texts they are interested in, they expend more effort learning and understanding the material (Schiefele, 1991). Similarly, when students are allowed to select the tasks that have personal value, they are more likely to use learning strategies like summarizing or backtracking rather than shortcuts like memo-
rizing, copying, or guessing. Open-ended activities provide students with opportunities to mold tasks to interests and values, thus supporting their efforts to make meaning while engaging them affectively.

Students in the study who were allowed to choose among activities and who had options about how to organize and plan showed more personal responsibility for their literacy learning because the activities themselves required such behaviors. For example, when selecting texts, students decided what their interests were, whether they were of the appropriate level, and how the text supported their reading progress. Similarly, in writing, students selected an approach to the topic, organized information, and monitored their execution. How did teachers provide choices and how did those choices affect students’ learning?

Providing choices during literacy instruction. In many of the classrooms observed, teachers structured the morning literacy time to encourage students to make personal choices. They wanted to demonstrate to students that literacy means pursuing personal aesthetic and informational goals. There are many ways that choices can be offered as part of the literacy curriculum. For example, students can select from a variety of tasks appropriate for their learning needs and interests. Interest can also be stimulated in reading and writing through the integration of literacy activities with science, art, and music, or in relation to classroom themes like chocolate, bears, or the March wind. For instance, in some classrooms students wrote and followed recipes for chocolate milkshakes and read, wrote, and listened to bear stories. These choices involved meaning making and learning goals, while capitalizing on individual interests and familiarity.

Another kind of choice that students can make is selecting their own texts for oral reading practice. Unlike traditional approaches in which all students read the same basal stories, students can be encouraged to think about choosing texts based on interest and level. Sometimes children may select texts in order to improve fluency or gain mastery, but at other times, they may select them for the pure enjoyment of the language. If children select inappropriate books, teachers can suggest more (or less) challenging texts. Then students take responsibility for evaluating texts to set new reading goals.

This approach to oral reading not only creates a greater interest in reading, it also encourages wider reading. Because children are expected to select books for free reading and reading with the teacher, they frequently browse in the classroom library. As a result, they become familiar with many books, and, as they exchange evaluations of books with their peers, they regularly discover new books. Compared to children whose daily reading experiences are confined to basal stories, these children have rich experiences in selecting, evaluating, and enjoying literature.

Another crucial element of choice is that it can encourage students to take personal responsibility for their tasks by setting goals and deciding how to reach those goals. For example, in one class, students read a text about the life cycle of the butterfly. The composition assignment was to use the text as a source of ideas. Students were expected to decide which ideas in the text interested them and how they wanted their final product to represent those ideas. Thus, students chose both process and product.

Liza, fascinated by the life cycle, composed this text: “I would fly away and find a mate. We will lay eggs and have children. It would start again so I would be a grandma and I will die and that would be my life. And then the little ones would be a mother and its mom will die and we will start over again.”

Butterflies inspired Joanna to write an action story: “One day I pretended to be a butterfly. I jumped in. I hit my head on the ceiling. Then I landed on the couch. My brother tried, too, but he didn’t land on the couch, but instead landed on the floor.”

In contrast, in classrooms where teachers assigned identical topics for composition, students had limited opportunities to integrate their interests with the topics. Closed tasks denied students the chance to make decisions about organizing information and creating unique products. In one class, the teacher told the children to write about “what I did at the farm today.” Instead of personal elaborations, many students’ efforts were mechanical, like these compositions: “We went to the farm. We had some food” [Betty]. “I did not like the farm kos it is sikey (stinky). I liked it a little” [Andrew].

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Allowing students to make choices encourages them to develop an interest in literacy, and it provides students an opportunity to plan and regulate their literacy learning.

**Challenge**

Some teachers, especially those in first grade, are justifiably wary of tasks that may overtax young students and cause frustration or failure. The solution is to assign tasks that children can master easily, thinking that such tasks will inspire confidence. However, we found that students showed scant enthusiasm for such literacy activities. The most motivated students were those who were engaged in moderately challenging tasks that led them to make new discoveries and to reorganize their understandings.

Moderately challenging tasks lead to positive feelings because they provide feedback to students about what they are learning and how they are progressing. If tasks are too easy, students become bored. If they are too difficult, students are likely to become frustrated. However, open tasks can be used to provide enough flexibility so that students can tackle a problem and use their competencies to solve it. In other words, open tasks allow all students to work at their fullest capacity by adjusting the goals and relative difficulty of the tasks.

Interviews with talented and successful people support the motivational value of moderately difficult tasks. When asked about their deep commitment to their work, chess masters, rock climbers, basketball players, musical composers, and surgeons report that the exhilaration of operating at one’s optimum level is all the reward they need for their efforts (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). The real compensation in such “peak” experiences is receiving accurate information about what they can do and how they can improve. Where do these experts acquire the information they use to improve? They cull it from their errors. Unlike many school children, they do not look upon their errors as failures, but as a way to diagnose what went wrong and how to improve (Clifford, 1991). As a result, the next time they engage in that activity, they adjust the challenge to skills so that they can continue to advance.

How can teachers accomplish such a feat? In the classrooms that successfully promoted challenge, teachers designed tasks that required reflection and planning and that could not be accomplished in a rote or automatic fashion. An additional feature of these tasks was that they could be accomplished in a variety of ways. Because solutions were not obvious, children drew on the resources they had and were developing. Thus challenging tasks tended to “pull” learning in a variety of ways. They prompted students to use more organizational and self-monitoring strategies, such as arranging the pieces of a game ahead of time; to use more and varied reading strategies, such as using title, picture, and sound-symbol cues simultaneously; and to persist longer at an activity.

**Challenging tasks.** One example of a challenging task that all students can accomplish successfully is the text scramble. Teachers reproduce text from stories or nursery rhymes on oaktag, cutting the sentences into individual words. Students reconstruct the sentences in a meaningful way. The task requires students to design a plan; monitor for decoding, meaning, punctuation, and upper and lower case letters; attend to sequencing; and use rehearsal for text memory. The task is accessible to students at various developmental levels. Students can solve it using a variety of strategies (i.e., they can use meaning or punctuation clues or both), and there are several solutions (i.e., students can recreate the original sentences from the text or create sentences of their own). This task encourages persistence. Instead of giving up, asking for answers, or going on to a new activity, students use their errors diagnostically (Clifford, 1991).

Steve, a below-average reader, made more than 25 attempts to arrange the words in one sentence so that they made sense. He tried many arrangements, rereading and checking each time to determine if it “sounded right.” He also used teacher hints (“What does a sentence start with?”) to introduce new strategies. After Steve finally completed the task, the teacher congratulated him. Steve smiled proudly and then asked for another sentence to complete.

Most closed or rote tasks lack personal challenges. In tasks where children fill in words, match sounds with pictures, or underline key words, there is little need to use learning strategies or maintain concentration. Many
students complete such tasks as if they are operating on "automatic pilot." The skills-focused tasks that provide the staple fare in their classrooms do not seem to provide students with opportunities for adjusting the tasks to make them personally challenging. As a consequence, meaning making, self-regulation, and pride in accomplishment suffer.

Control

A third feature of open-ended activities is that they provide students some control over their learning. A significant goal of literacy education is to support learners' independence and versatility as readers. When teachers and students share control, students learn to make crucial literacy decisions themselves.

Sharing control has consequences for motivation as well. When teachers completely control classroom tasks and processes, students are likely to perceive that they are being pressured to think or perform in a certain way. However, when teachers share control (e.g., invite children to sequence tasks, choose partners, or design a strategy), students interpret instruction as information they can use to learn and improve (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991). For example, research has shown that children in shared-control classrooms reported more interest in their schoolwork and perceived themselves as more competent than those in teacher-controlled classrooms (Ryan & Grolnick, 1986).

Students want to see themselves as originators of plans and ideas, not as followers in a grand scheme they may not understand. Tasks and classroom structures that are overly controlling unwittingly undermine intrinsic motivation by removing the element of student participation, standard setting, and decision making. Shared control provides students with both the tools and the opportunities to take responsibility for their learning. They select strategies to reach their goals and protect their intentions by avoiding distractions (Corno, 1992). For example, one student clearly communicated her need to concentrate when she said, "Shut up, Jason, I am trying to work. Do you mind?"

Open tasks facilitate student control. Because open tasks are more cognitively complex than closed tasks, they require students to think strategically and to monitor and evaluate their learning. When students are actively involved in controlling their learning, they feel greater ownership of their performance and achievement. Typical open tasks include trade book reading, composition, partner reading, and games or interactive activities in which students manipulate text to create meaning or solidify skills. For example, when students compose, they can use wall charts of vowel sounds and lists of favorite vocabulary that the class has generated as sources for spelling and ideas.

Another activity that promotes student control is sequencing sentence strips from a favorite story. Students paste the strips in sequence and then illustrate the accompanying text. In this activity, students have to plan how to accomplish the task. When Susan completed this task, she followed these steps. First, she drew on her memory of the text to sequence the strips in the appropriate order. Then she used text features to check her work (in the story, characters appeared in a logical order). Finally, she compared her version to the actual text which she got from the classroom library.

However, during closed tasks children have fewer opportunities to select, monitor, and evaluate their strategy use. These tasks mostly require automatized responses or repeated application of the same response as opposed to active strategy use. For example, one common task required students to decode two words and decide which one has a certain sound. In another typical closed task, students read a sentence and decided which of two words correctly completed the sentence.

Although the goal of using sound-symbol knowledge is an important one, the tasks used to meet this goal are very limiting. Children do not have to devise a plan or organize information. As a result, they have few opportunities to see how sound-symbol knowledge facilitates reading comprehension. Indeed, many closed tasks (such as those in some workbooks) are so repetitive that after several months of first-grade reading instruction students recognize the pattern and little thinking is required to accomplish them. Less active involvement in literacy activities leads to disempowerment and ultimately to disinterest for many students.

Interviews with children further illuminate how students use their problem-solving skills to gain control over tasks. In this study, when students engaged in open tasks were asked
about the learning difficulties they had encountered and how they handled those difficulties, they were likely to respond by naming a specific difficulty, such as "I knew they had the same letter, but not the same sound" and by saying that they heightened their effort to solve the difficulty. By contrast, students who were engaged in mostly closed tasks were more vague about their problems, often saying that the words were hard or that they had trouble following directions. In addition, they often responded that when they had learning difficulties they "guessed" or "just did it."

The difference in the students' responses appears to indicate that those who spend time in open tasks are more self-directed and aware of how learning processes can be used, whereas those in closed tasks are more narrowly focused either on meeting the expectations of the teacher or on the task.

Collaboration

Although previous conceptions of teaching and learning emphasized the teacher's role in transmitting knowledge, more recent ideas have emphasized the social and interactional nature of learning. Some have described the desired relationship between teachers and students (as well as among students) as an apprenticeship in which a more able companion guides, supports, and challenges another's understanding (e.g., Newman & Schwager, 1993). In addition to cognitive benefits, social guidance and cooperation in classrooms are also fundamental to motivation.

Social interaction is motivational in several ways. First, peer comments and ideas can pique students' curiosity and spark further interest. Second, children's observations of their classmates' progress may increase their confidence in their own ability to succeed (Schunk, 1989). Third, research in cooperative learning has shown that working with others promotes student engagement in work and group consciousness (Slavin, 1987). Collaboration can increase both effort and persistence. Situations that encourage productive social interaction offer ways for students to develop competence and efficacy as readers and writers.

Modeling and coaching were two activities we observed in classrooms that supported student motivation. In many classrooms, mixed-ability groups worked together on related tasks. Children in these groups could observe that there were multiple ways of planning and executing tasks, and they could borrow strategies that seemed useful. At the same time, children could develop more refined understandings of tasks and procedures by observing others more expert than they (Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1989). For example, Shannon profited from the clues Kate provided when they were working on flash cards together. When Shannon mispronounced words, Kate read a sentence from the back of the card to provide context, asked questions like "Does this have an s in it?", and prompted with "What is the opposite of slow?"

In addition, students often adopted a coaching role, integrating cognitive and motivational strategies to support successful completion of tasks. For example, Anna, an able reader, shared the oral reading of a story with Matt, a less able reader. When Matt accidentally skipped a page, Anna reminded him, "That doesn't make sense yet; it happened later. Go back." When Matt stumbled on a word, Anna said, "Don't ask me for help. Try to sound it out." Matt dutifully (and successfully) did so.

Students in classrooms where collaboration was encouraged gave and received help routinely, but because tasks differed, the help rarely consisted of giving answers. For example, during a Bingo game, one child helped her peers by pronouncing, then spelling, bingo words. One of the players requested help, asking, "Is listen spelled l-i-s-t-e-n?" These activities supported learning, encouraged continued persistence and engagement, and helped students feel like competent readers and writers.

In classrooms where students completed mostly closed activities, children remained at their desks working on identical tasks. Although teachers did not actively discourage collaboration on seatwork (indeed, in some classrooms, desks were in work groups of four), there was a premium on quiet because teachers met with reading groups at that time. Also, students had fewer models. They worked at the same desks with the same peers day in and day out. The same was true in reading groups. In some classes, reading groups were formed by ability, so the models available were limited both in number and in expertise.
Finally, because all children completed identical tasks, it appeared that children in classes doing closed activities regarded help seeking more as cheating than helping a peer learn. Thus, there were more behaviors like veiled glances at a neighbor’s work as well as shielding papers from prying eyes. When students perceive situations as competitive, they focus less on effort and learning and more on appearing able or out-performing their peers (Ames, 1992).

**Opportunities to learn from and with others.** Collaboration can be encouraged in several ways. First, in classrooms where students have a choice of tasks, they can select activities and join groups of children with the same interests at various centers around the classroom. Because most children complete several tasks during reading time, they have opportunities to work with many other children. Moreover, the students in the interest groups can be encouraged to help peers and to provide explanations of goals and processes. Additionally, when appropriate, teachers can redirect students’ questions to a peer who has successfully completed a similar activity. Finally, students can be asked to demonstrate to peers or to explain an important understanding they have gained.

In one classroom where students frequently generated prediction questions about text, the teacher asked students to help her spell as she wrote the questions on the easel. As students spelled, she asked them to explain their thinking processes in selecting the letters for the words or where they had learned the words. Modeling how to request and give help and then providing opportunities for students to assist each other will encourage children to regard literacy as an opportunity for engagement and improvement rather than a search for the correct answer or a race to completion. Thus, open tasks in collaborative classrooms are more likely to foster intrinsic interest in learning through help seeking, help giving, and child discussions about ideas and strategies.

**Constructing meaning**

Open and closed tasks offer students different opportunities to construct meaning. When they complete open tasks, students have more chances to construct meaning in text as well as to build a rationale for the meaningfulness of literacy activities.

Constructing meaning promotes motivation by assisting children in making sense of their learning—the tasks in which they engage and the strategies they employ (Paris & Byrnes, 1989). They use information gleaned from their daily tasks in literacy to construct purposes for reading and writing and how they may be entertaining, informational, and useful. If children find that literacy allows them to solve interesting problems, they will associate reading and writing with thinking, challenge, and personal growth. If, however, they associate literacy with completing exercises, they may interpret it simply as manipulating symbols or solving abstract puzzles (Resnick, 1987). Increasingly, national assessments like the National Assessment of Educational Progress (1993) suggest that many children continue to separate learning to read and write in school from out-of-school uses of reading and writing.

Children’s responses to the interview question “What are you supposed to learn from your reading activity?” provides clear evidence of the effect of tasks on students’ understanding of and appreciation for reading and writing. After completing open tasks, children frequently responded that they were learning new information (e.g., “About the life cycle of a butterfly” or “Where the wind goes”) and monitoring their self-improvement (“So I can read second-grade books”). However, children who completed mostly closed tasks typically took a more limited view. They often responded that they were learning word parts (e.g., “short a”) or that they “didn’t know” what they were supposed to learn from their activities. Apparently their tasks did not provide enough information for them to set meaningful literacy goals.

**Literacy tasks support the construction of meaning.** How did teachers in this study promote students’ motivation through meaning making? In one classroom, the children and teacher created thematic lists of favorite vocabulary words on large charts. There were color words, Halloween words, apple words, words about birds, and others. Sean used the charts to add some words to his personal word bank. However, in the process he had many opportunities to construct meaning. As he read
the sentences on the “black” chart, he was aided by the context: “Blackberries are black. A scary bat is black. A bowling ball is black. A crayon can be black. A blackbird is black. The sky is black at night. A witch’s hat is black. Watermelon seeds are black.” Compared to the limited vocabulary and decontextualized sentences that most worksheets offer (e.g., “Can a goat float in a boat?”), this task provided opportunities to use meaning as an aid both in building a rich vocabulary and in learning to use many decoding strategies.

During free reading time in one classroom, two students retreated to the puppet theater to share a story. As they read, they spontaneously picked up puppets and began to act out the story. This task allowed students to use various ways to create meaning. Compared to the typical exercise of reading short paragraphs and answering comprehension questions, this open task supported students’ creative responses to text and generated enthusiasm for personal and meaningful interpretations. However, tasks alone cannot facilitate meaning making. Students must have an understanding of how to approach literacy tasks if they are to solve them meaningfully. Therefore, instruction is an important factor in providing students tools to use in constructing meaning.

If students are to be motivated readers and writers, we must give them the tools and the reasons to read and write and allow them to discover the many paths to literacy.

Instruction supports the construction of meaning. Teachers who are most successful in motivating their students introduce, model, and provide opportunities for students to use many reading strategies. In addition to teaching sound-symbol correspondences and the use of sentence context for decoding, they teach comprehension skills such as predicting, question-asking, relating stories to prior knowledge, and making inferences. For example, one teacher demonstrated how students could use a combination of strategies by covering up key words in a big book with self-sticking notes and asking students to use the context to predict the words and then use sound-symbol cues to confirm or revise.

Teachers can introduce both instructional and recreational texts by asking students what they know about the topic and asking them to predict what the author would say. When asked to predict what the text Noisy Nora (Wells, 1973) would be about, students suggested: “A little mouse that makes a lot of noise,” “She gets in trouble for making things fall down,” and “She is annoying.” Before studying the text A House Is a House for Me (Hoberman, 1978), the teacher asked what kinds of houses creatures live in. Children’s responses ranged from the conventional (e.g., cement, mansion, wood, apartment) to the imaginative (e.g., cave, tree house, mouse hole, gingerbread, cage). During reading, children delighted in discovering their contributions in print. After reading, children added to their original lists of dwellings.

In addition to teaching a variety of reading/thinking strategies, successful teachers foster metacognition about learning and reading. Reflectiveness can be encouraged by inviting students to plan and evaluate their learning. In this study, in classes where students engaged in many open tasks, students were guided to make and sequence choices and to evaluate their decisions.

Some teachers regularly conducted a discussion at the end of literacy activities in which students were invited to describe both more and less successful strategies and to help each other by making suggestions for “working smarter.” One teacher emphasized the importance of self control for learning by helping her students maintain attention. Used judiciously, her brief question “Are you focused?” reminded students that they needed to redirect attention to stay in control of their learning. Other tactics, such as asking students “How do you know?” and requiring them to explain the process they use to complete an activity reminds students that they have a major role in deciding which information is useful and valuable.
In classrooms where strategy teaching is largely confined to decoding sound-symbol correspondences, there may be little emphasis on comprehension or on how strategies can be used in reading extended text. This approach to literacy instruction not only limits students’ strategic repertoires, but it also restricts opportunities to use reading strategies in meaningful situations. Unless students have many chances to use reading strategies in authentic reading and writing, they may begin to doubt their usefulness and value.

Consequences

Open and closed tasks also have different consequences for students. Closed tasks direct attention to correct answers, often reported by numbers, red pencil, stars, or smiley faces. Children may be forced to judge their performance by the number of stars they receive, whether their paper was hung on the board, and how they compare to other students. In contrast, open tasks seldom have one correct answer, allowing students to focus on whether they achieved their purposes, whether they used good tactics, and whether they tried to do their best. Rather than stars or stickers, students can base their self-assessments on the effort they expended, their enjoyment, or the meaningfulness of the activity. The consequences of this latter focus are usually positive feelings about effort, ownership, achievement, and responsibility.

The motivational outcomes of literacy tasks influence how students interpret their roles in learning to read. Those interpretations can affect their desire to persist and to remain involved in literacy. Tasks affect the consequences of literacy in two ways.

First, open tasks support a constructive approach to failure (Clifford, 1991). If a task can be approached at an appropriate difficulty level, miscues or errors evoke a strategy orientation in which students interpret “failures” not as evidence of insufficient ability or effort but as temporary setbacks caused by less than optimal strategy use. In these situations, students adapt their strategies rather than give up. When students are moderately challenged, they are likely to show such positive responses to failure as increased persistence, more varied strategy use, greater task interest, and increased task performance.

Second, when students see tasks as controllable, they are more likely to take personal responsibility for them (Weiner, 1979). In addition, they have confidence that they can adjust their effort and strategy use appropriately. They do not interpret all situations in a similar manner, such as the student who says, “I’m not good at reading” or “I’ll never figure this out.” Instead, with open tasks and appropriate support from cognitive and metacognitive strategy instruction, students are able to maintain a belief in their ability to succeed as readers and writers.

In fact, students define failure differently in open and closed tasks. In closed tasks, if students cannot get the correct answer, they may become frustrated or discouraged because the one avenue to success is blocked. However, in open tasks, if one approach does not work, another can be tried. Errors are regarded as information about what one does or doesn’t know or what one has or hasn’t tried. In either case, this information can be used to adjust goals or strategies.

For example, when Steve was engaged in the text scramble, he ran into several obstacles. He had rearranged the sentence “Then she felled some chairs” several ways. Each time, the word some was inappropriately placed. Finally, Steve revealed that he did not know that word. With some cues and strategy support, he decoded some and completed the sentence. Similarly, after he failed to use a teacher cue, “What does a sentence start with?”, Steve asked what the difference between upper- and lowercase t was. In both cases, he used the information not as signals of his low ability, but as clues to help him reach a meaningful solution.

In summary, open-ended tasks are more likely to provide appropriate challenges, genuine choices, some student control over learning, opportunities to collaborate with others and to construct meaning through reading and writing. These activities support student motivation through positive, affective consequences and by fostering students’ determination, effort, and thoughtful engagement.

The classroom observations and examples reported in this article suggest that motivation for literacy is not necessarily a quality that children bring to instruction. That is, motivation does not reside solely in the child; rather it
is in the interaction between students and their literacy environments (Paris & Turner, 1994). This finding underscores the considerable role that instruction plays in influencing children's motivation for literacy. Because children come to know and understand literacy primarily through the activities in which they engage, literacy tasks have enormous potential to influence students' feelings and attitudes toward literacy as well as their use of learning strategies and self-regulation.

Teachers who foster motivation in literacy classrooms:

1. Provide authentic choices and purposes for literacy. They recast activities to emphasize the enjoyment and the informational values of literacy. Instead of referring to daily tasks as work, these teachers rename them by emphasizing their function, such as "Today we are going to plan for Clifford's birthday party by writing invitations, composing stories about what the party will be like, and making lists of guests."

2. Allow students to modify tasks so the difficulty and interest levels are challenging. They demonstrate to students the many ways that a task can be done. Students are given concrete examples of successful, but different, approaches to tasks. Students are taught to assess whether a task is too easy or difficult for them and how to adjust goals or strategies for appropriate difficulty. Such teachers point out how students have molded tasks to their interests and assign tasks that can be modified in many ways.

3. Show students how they can control their learning. They teach students how to evaluate what they know, and how to monitor and evaluate their learning. Reminders such as "Are you staying focused?" and "What's more important—that you made a mistake or what you learned?" guide students' inner speech so they can self-monitor.

4. Encourage collaboration. These teachers emphasize the positive aspects of help seeking and help giving. They design activities so that students have opportunities to work with many different peers. They teach students how to help each other by emphasizing the giving of clues, not answers. Some individual activities are recast as collaborative ones. For example, students work on flash cards together. One student gives hints, such as putting the word in context or giving a synonym or antonym. Similarly, individual reading is sometimes done in pairs.

5. Emphasize strategies and metacognition for constructing meaning. Students need a repertoire of strategies in order to respond flexibly in reading and writing situations. Extensive applications of comprehension (as well as decoding/encoding) strategies assist students in acquiring an understanding of what literacy is as well as how to use and understand it.

6. Use the consequences of tasks to build responsibility, ownership, and self-regulation. Group evaluation is a regular part of literacy instruction. Students are encouraged to share their successes and their failures. These teachers help students see that errorless learning is not learning at all. Real learning comes about through error, since errors provide information about needed improvement. Such teachers emphasize the value of effort and honing strategies. These tools equip students to attempt more and more challenging tasks.

Our purpose in this article was to share the motivational strategies of some expert teachers in literacy instruction. These teachers were successful in helping their students develop an interest in reading, in encouraging wide reading in the classroom and at home, and in instilling an intrinsic desire for learning and reading in many of their students. They did this by molding literacy instruction to the needs, interests, and skills of their students. If students are to be motivated readers and writers, we must give them the tools and the reasons to read and write and allow them to discover the many paths to literacy—paths that fit the diverse goals, purposes, interests, and social needs of children.

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References


"Well, then how do I get that Webster guy to put it in his dictionary?"

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