An Offer They Cannot Refuse

by Rosemary Eis mann

In recent years, we educators and the public have been presented with a set of buzzword solutions to answer the hoary old question, “Why can’t Johnny read?” Among the buzzwords we often hear are standards and testing. But like so many other quick solutions, these answers are a temporary fix. Standards and testing will never make our students readers.

The answer to why Johnny can’t read is as simple as it is challenging to remedy: He doesn’t read because he doesn’t want to. Our job as parents and educators—our challenge—is to find a way to make students want to read. It’s that simple and that monumental. Unlike the ideas of standards and testing, however, it’s not a quick answer.

A Tactic for Every Student

So if the answer is that simple, where do we start? How do we get students to read? I say, make them an offer they can’t refuse.

That is, find a way to turn students on to reading. The ways to turn students on to reading are as numerous and varied as the students themselves. Over the years, I’ve tried many different tactics, and here are a few that work.

Tactic 1: Show students what reading has to offer. Books are a cheap trip, I tell my students. Through reading, one can travel to distant lands and times, amplify news events, examine social treatises, and dissect historical events. Whether a person likes to read “boy” books, “girl” books, red-hot-mama books, scary books, war books, love books, or whatever, reading is a great escape.

Tactic 2: Find a genre that intrigues each student. If a student enters my class announcing she has never read a book in her life, I view that statement as a particular challenge. It’s a matter of finding the right fit: student to book. So, I interview the student with questions such as these:

• “What are your likes and dislikes?”
• “What movies do you prefer?”
• “What television shows do you watch?”
• “What section of the newspaper do you read first?”
• “What period of history fascinates you?”
• “Do you like science?”
• “Do you like to be scared?”

After that, I show her my bounty of books—I have books on my classroom shelves, underneath the computer table, in the trunk of my car—and try to make a match. Interestingly, once a student takes the first step of selecting a book—no matter the genre or title—she is soon moving into the rich end of that genre. I have a selection of gangster books, for instance, that includes books by Mario Puzo, James Lee Burke, Walter Mosley, and Raymond Chandler. From these titles, the transition to Sherlock Holmes is a natural. Scary books by Dean Koontz can lead students to read Mary Shelley, effortlessly. And shifting from my comprehensive selection of what some people call girl books—essentially romances such as Danielle Steele—to the likes of Jane Austen’s Emma is sometimes not much of a stretch.

Tactic 3: Provide easy access to reading material. Teachers need to move away from standard lists of books to a more personalized and sometimes contemporary reading program. Classics should not be viewed as the only books students read. Contemporary authors are not to be diminished by educators. Above all, books need to be accessible to all.

Access to contemporary novels is a simple matter: hit every garage sale in town and ask neighbors for their discard. Then you can mix up the garage sales finds with the hard-core classics. Place books by genre in the classroom. (Here, a bit of trickery aids the teaching process.)

Good literature also can be found in magazines. If a student says, “I only look at cartoons,” you can sneak a copy of The New Yorker on his desk. He will move from the cartoons to the poetry to the short stories.

Tactic 4: Encourage reading for reading’s sake. The goal should be to read, rather than analysis. Analysis often hampers a student’s enjoyment of the literature because he is always looking for answers. Every sentence is examined for a hidden meaning. Fortunately, I received my university degree before heuristics became the reason for reading.

As students read best-sellers, contemporary fiction, and high-interest books, they discover reading is a life force—and they come back for more. As their interests begin to vary, the very act of reading becomes part of their being.

William Golding admonishes readers of Lord of the Flies to read for the pure joy. “Don’t pay attention to the teacher. She will talk about symbolism,” he said. “She will tell you how to read the book.” He said he wrote Lord of the Flies because he always wanted to live on a coral island. He wanted to write a book about boys left to their own devices. Yet, if you look at the websites on Lord of the Flies, you’ll find they are filled with analysis of the shape of the island, the symbolism of the color green, and character representations.

Long-Term Benefits . . .

Once a student begins reading for the pure joy of it, he never stops. One of my male students came to me after school and said: “Alright, I read My Antonia, O Pioneers, Wuthering Heights, and Emma. Enough with the girl books.” But I knew he liked the classics, so I gave him Tess of the d’Urbervilles, which is essentially a “girl” book, and he devoured it. Other choices could have been Like Water for Chocolate by Laura Esquivel, The Joy Luck Club by Amy Tan, or Fortune’s Daughter by Isabel Allende—all “modern classics.”

After school on another day, I drove through the local McDonald’s. Once I ordered, the student working the drive through asked, “Is that you, Miss Eismann? Can you find a copy of Mario Puzo’s Omerta for me?”

Another student found his niche in scary books with happy endings; he was a Dean Koontz man. Another, who read only fantasy, became a Ray Bradbury devotee.

Recently, a student stopped me in the post office to thank me for the books I used to buy her. When she was in the tenth grade, her favorite author was Danielle Steele, and I couldn’t get books fast enough for her. She’s a university graduate now.

. . . But No Quick Fixes

None of these students became readers to prepare for a test that would determine whether . . . see An Offer They Cannot Refuse, next page
or not they would graduate from high school. From what we have seen, we all know that no amount of standards, standardization, or forced learning will create a reader. You simply cannot force a child to read with passion. Assign a book report, and some students will go to sparknotes.com on the Internet or read great book summaries and turn in standard book reports.

Each of the students above simply made a conscious decision to read. And, as we have also seen, when a student finds a book he cherishes, he will write an excellent book report, surprising the teacher with a plot diagram, a theme analysis, and examples of literary devices. Basically, when kids have desire, when education meets their intrinsic and extrinsic needs, reading will be valuable.

And that is where we—as parents and educators—come in. It’s our job to find each student’s strengths and exploit his talents. As Vito Corleone says in Mario Puzo’s The Godfather, we need to “make him an offer he cannot refuse.” Only then will he truly become a reader.

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