

# Unlocking Motivation for Student Reading

## Investigating Our Practice



Let's face it: we are all guilty of using techniques in our practice that do not feel quite right. Oftentimes, we stick with these practices because we know that they are old stand-bys for many teachers. Sometimes, it is because we simply cannot find a better way. We may tinker with the criteria or the manner of presentation, but are never fully satisfied with the results.

Such was my dilemma with the practice of independent reading in my classroom. While I felt this was an important time during the day, I struggled with how to hold my students accountable for such time. I had seen various practices and names for this time through my years as a teacher-on-call: "Drop Everything and Read" (DEAR), "Uninterrupted and Sustained Silent Reading" (USSR), "Choice time", and so on. All meant to generate some sense of trendiness or excitement for the students. I had also seen a variety of home-reading programs and believed that these were important programs to help create the habit of reading. A valiant cause, to be sure!

Over the years, I have tried many of the practices that I saw other teachers use. Initially, I had some blind faith that if I gave students the opportunity to read materials of their choice, it would

simply happen. Of course, I tried to role model active reading and did my best to generate excitement for a variety of genres. For many students, this was what they needed. They enjoyed this time, and often read at home without any insistence from their teacher or parents. For the reluctant reader, however, this was a time to look busy and, possibly, to tune out.

*I began an inquiry process on how to motivate my students to share their thoughts on their reading choices.*

Those reluctant readers presented a multi-faceted problem. First, how could I motivate them or help them find material that they might enjoy? And, once this was done, how can they demonstrate that they are doing so? After all, a large part of the teaching gig has to do with accountability.

Enter the book report. It's a tried and true tradition for students of all ages. Many teachers try to use a routine of monthly reports, and there are a variety of templates out there to provide some variety from classroom to classroom. I spent a few years using variations of such book reports and felt that I was doing my best to hold my students accountable for their reading time.

But it didn't feel quite

right. Increasingly, students were plagiarizing reports or complaining about the mundane nature of the task. While I genuinely felt that students *were* reading, they resented having to report out on the process.

This past year, I began an inquiry into how to motivate my students to share their thoughts on reading choices. I had always

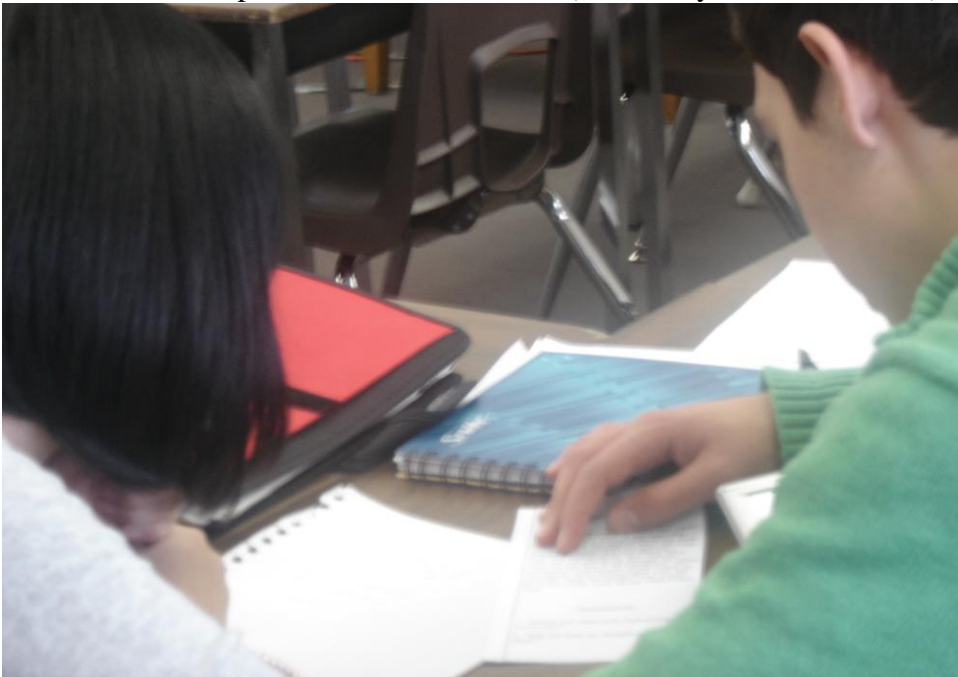
believed in the practice of providing choice for my students (I think I mistakenly felt that giving my students the choice in what they read was enough for this assignment), but I wanted to focus on the idea of differentiated product, a term discussed in Carol Ann Tomlinson's book *How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms* (2001). My recent studies in the *Teaching with Technology* program at SFU suggested several ways that students might be able to present their ideas – ways that might stimulate their creative juices.

In discussing the topic of choice with my students, they needed to appreciate their obligations toward the process. The English Language Arts IRPs

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are packed with references to students sharing ideas, reflecting, interpreting, and demonstrating comprehension about what they read. Specifically, it highlights reading “just right” texts for enjoyment and to increase fluency (*Reading and Viewing, B3*). I decided that one way to increase motivation on the task would be to focus on students’ opinions rather than summaries of the events. By making it more personal, hopefully the students would show more initiative with the process.



As a class, we brainstormed a variety of ways for students to share their ideas. These were ideas that students were used to using for all reports (these ideas are summarized in table one). After that, we discussed ways that technology might be able to help us present our ideas as well, and a second list was generated (table two). We took the time to view several book reviews on line and designed a criteria for what we felt

made a good review (table three). As an initial task, I had students write reviews on a book I was reading to the class at the time. Students submitted their reviews on a class wiki and commented on each other’s work. This process helped us to establish a firm understanding of the criteria involved.

Next up, we focused on the element of choice with respect to presenting their ideas. I was able to expand on some new ideas for the class (Prezi, Keynote, Xtranormal)

and challenged them to present their ideas in a way that they found interesting. Reviews were to be submitted about once a month, and my one rule was that they needed to use a different presentation style each time. Each month, I would include a few new web tools that might be used.

My goal was twofold: to introduce them to a variety of presentation styles (and-hopefully-help them find ways that suited

their individual strengths) and to increase their motivation in sharing their thoughts and ideas on the stories that they read. I hoped that the students would become more aware of certain details and ideas in their reading as they anticipated various ways of presenting their understanding.

Daniel Pink discusses the role of autonomy in his book, *Drive* (2009). He stresses that autonomy is an important intrinsic motivator -- especially for routine tasks. With book reviews due each month, the students’ ability to decide on how they would like to present was a key motivating factor. Autonomy has been linked to performance, persistence, and production (Patall, Cooper, Robinson, 2008), which was the basis of my inquiry.

The results were quite telling. Through surveys, all students said that having choice in their presentation methods helped them to share their ideas in a better way. 🌱