

# Teacher to Teacher

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## The Extra Value Meal Deal: Building a Culture of Literacy in Your Community

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*So how did you start your day today? Did you take a too quick shower followed by something that looked like breakfast and a few quiet minutes reading the newspaper? Or maybe it was the back of the cereal box you read... or the latest issue of Sports Illustrated... or the juicy pulp novel that you are too embarrassed to tell anyone about? Whatever it was, odds are that you spent some of your leisure time reading something. The unconscious choice to engage in literate behavior is learned.*

According to Rubin (1986): Literacy is not a quality that one possesses or doesn't possess. It is not like red hair and freckles, permanently distinguishing some people. Nor is reading like having a healthy heart muscle that one builds up and maintains through practice. Rather, reading is something that one does. Literacy, likewise, is a way of coming in contact with the world. Some people engage in literate behavior with greater frequency and intensity than others. Some people use literate behavior to expand their worlds across time and space. Some people read traffic signs and cereal boxes. (p. 81)

The purpose of this publication is to explore ways in which adult and family literacy educators can inspire community members to not only value literate activities, but to engage in reading behaviors that will help them come closer to traveling across time and space rather than figuring out what Tony the Tiger has to say.

### Your Sphere of Influence Starts With Self Assessment

The first step to helping your community value literate behavior is to look inward and reflect on your own literacy habits. When and in what contexts do you read? Is it while you are on the treadmill, at dinner, or by the fire on a lazy Sunday? What motivates you to read? Some people read when they are at home on a snowy day, and some people read when they get stuck in traffic. Any of these motivators is perfectly acceptable. What is significant about them is that they were probably acquired gradually.

Reflecting on how you became literate and what motivates you to read will help you be conscious of the different ways in which reading becomes a part of one's everyday existence. These questions are an excellent frame for a discussion with community members and families about how to help everyone to incorporate reading activities into their lives.

### Bookworms Don't Always Read Tolstoy

Another important perspective to remember concerning literacy is that while it is true that one can engage in literate behaviors ranging from intense to effortless, variety and the choice to engage in different levels of activity are the key. Anna Quindlen (1998) likened reading to a buffet. Some reading material, like Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, is without question roast beef. There are also super-sized combo meals like the Grisham novels. Not to be missed are the provocative side dishes such as *The New Yorker* magazine, or those little "life lesson" tomes by the bookstore's cash register. This author, who indulges regularly in a healthful but bland diet of scholarly journals, rewards herself every Saturday with a big help-

ing of dessert in the form of *People* magazine. Furthermore, some reading materials, like liver, are consumed only after one has acquired a taste for them.

The most important place to start is to at least model a willingness to go to the literacy buffet. If your reading diet is strictly green beans, take a lesson from Chef Emeril Lagasse, and kick it up a notch by selecting a different course every now and then. Encourage discussions among your colleagues and community members about what people are reading and how they view their own trip to the literacy buffet.

Be mindful of the context in which book talks happen. Everyone thinks of a book talk as talking place in a classroom or a library. How boring can that be? Are you dealing with a group of only adults? Great! Make the effort to connect with your community by figuring out where folks like to congregate and host a few non-threatening book talks at that venue. Invite everyone to meet at the local watering hole to talk about literacy. Or the bowling alley. Why not sponsor a "Beers, Balls, and Books" day once month in your community? If that is too risqué for your taste, figure out which laundromat is the community favorite and host "Reading, Writing, and Washing" Saturday. The point here is that talking about reading should be fun as well as informative. For folks who are struggling readers, context and environment can greatly inhibit or enhance their participation in literacy discussions.

### You Read What You Like

When you proselytize the importance of engaging in reading activities you must remember that part of your job is helping your colleagues to remember that struggling readers often sink into the self-defeating cycle of attempting to read materials that do not hold their interest. If the material does not interest them, they will not practice. Without practice, readers fail to improve or stretch their worlds.

So goes the story of Jill, a receptionist who works at an advertising firm. She got the job by way of an internship she took in her senior year through her high school's business partnership program. She was offered the position upon graduation five years ago and was thrilled at the seemingly large salary of ten dollars an hour.

As the years passed, she focused on building her life in ways that most folks do who are no longer thinking about activities that center on formal learning. She married, continued to work, and now has two children. If asked about her role as a mother, she will explain with great passion, "I am not going to let my kids suffer in school the way I did. I will not force them to work at things that

don't interest them. Not everyone is supposed to go to college and that is OK. My kids should be able to have a choice and I want my kids to know that they are loved. I am working very hard right now to make memories with them that will carry them into adulthood." She then adds with pride, "It has taken me a few years, but I have every single one of the Cat in The Hat videos along with Cinderella, Snow White, and all the other Disney movies. My kids are going to enjoy those stories and remember the special times we spent together so that they know whenever they come home that our family is a safe and happy place to be."

Essentially, Jill lives in a print-free home. And she is unwittingly raising her children in a print-free home. She fails to recognize that a huge part of the magic of children's literature is that children read the stories themselves or listen to the stories read to them in a loving way. This working mother and her children read cereal boxes in the morning or the TV guide at night. At work, when she hears others engage in conversations about world events or topics, she doesn't engage in the conversation because she "doesn't know about that stuff." When she is asked why she never went to college, she replies, "Oh I'm a working girl. I don't have time for all that stress and jumping through hoops just to get a silly piece of paper. Besides, I make good money here."

Instead of books for her children, Jill chose video tapes. Yes, there may be some children's books around the house that were gifts. However, with no one to encourage their use, they become feckless. The prognosis for Jill and her children is grim. Not fatal, just grim. The best prescription is to first remember that it will take a long time to change this family's view of reading. The first step in that direction is to change how Jill looks at reading as well as herself. The phrase "life-long learner" does not resonate for Jill because she associates learning with the drudgery of reading and formal schooling. In her mind it is too late for her to improve intellectually or academically. And she fails to make connections between her job and her education. If Jill is married to someone with an education who makes a bigger salary, then the motivation for furthering her intellectual horizons, as well as her earning potential, are that much more removed. Because she is primary caretaker of her children, Jill is now unknowingly passing down her views about literate behavior to her own children. And thus, this stagnate intellectual cycle is in real danger of being repeated.

In addition to book clubs, educators should be creative in their attempts to not only sponsor family literacy events but adult-oriented programs that teach parents how to take advantage of local resources such as libraries, art museums, and science centers. Thoughtful planning in this arena will include a field trip for adults to these sites, as well as information for families on how to utilize public transportation systems.

When you think about it, Jill is the reason why Oprah chose to start a book club. The genius in Oprah's book club lies in its marriage of the passive and low threatening activity of television with the interactive exercise of reading. We can do the same thing--except instead of marrying TV with books, we can marry the radio or community events such as the ones below.

### **Classroom Libraries and Community Events for Students**

One of the great opportunities that books offer is the chance for readers to make connections between what is written on a page and the real world. Encouraging an entire adult and family literacy program to build classroom libraries allows teachers and staff to creatively take advantage of modeling literate behavior as well as making meaningful connections through literate activities. Classroom libraries do not necessarily require program funding lines. Book drives can be just as successful as canned food or blood drives. Yes, even in a math class there is a place for a library. Classroom libraries give teachers the chance to collaborate with one another (should they choose to) in terms of integrating lessons or units. They also

provide a creative outlet for teachers to tweak their lesson plans to be integrated with existing and relevant reading material. The construction of classroom libraries is an effective vehicle to increase community partnerships and volunteerism. Goodwill Stores, the Salvation Army, and local churches are rich arenas in which educators can network and ask for support. Furthermore, what teachers do with their classroom libraries is appropriate fodder for a staff meeting as well as a discussion topic at "Beer, Balls, and Books" night at the bowling alley.

The ultimate integration of community literacy would be a scenario in which adults and children engage in some sort of activities centered on literacy-based themes. Events of this type are common once or twice a year in elementary schools. Usually there is a school-wide drive in which, if so many books are read, a public figure (usually the principal) will promise to engage in some mildly humiliating behavior like kissing a pig or mud wrestling the resource officer. There are also national programs like Read Across America Day (also known as Dr. Seuss's birthday) observed annually on March 2. Some schools encourage students and teachers to dress up in various book characters. Other schools in conjunction with community centers, nursing homes, and shopping malls host family literacy pajama parties in which families come to a designated space in their pajamas and pillows and spend time reading together. Events like this can also be framed around camping. Families simply "camp out" underneath the stars with flashlights and books and read together at the local park or inside the natatorium or gymnasium.

Better yet, help your community think about what Eldridge Cleaver has in common with Dr. Dre and Eminem by looking for bridges between popular music and literate behavior. Again, the first step is for you to find a way to get connected with the community you are trying to reach. That means you need to watch a little MTV or find the radio station that kids listen to. Listen for any amount of time and you'll learn about how MC contests are the new trend in lots of urban nightclubs. These events are competitive arenas where rappers battle each other in impromptu raps that reflect and reply to each other's prose. They are something akin to a heated debate of the Beat Poets on American Bandstand--only louder and much faster. MC contests can be held at the Boys and Girls Club, the local YMCA, the parking lot of a local ice cream stand, radio stations, movie theaters, or record stores.

### **Action- Not Just Lip Service**

Helping people to value and engage in rich literate behavior is a calling that requires more than just telling folks that they should read. Teaching the value of literate behavior is something that comes across in both what you say and what you do. Think about what you do that demonstrates to your colleagues, students, and community that you visit the reading buffet often and in different ways. Encourage your community leaders to participate in book discussions or to select books for those talks. Find ways to give rewards and reinforcements that are directly linked to the construction of individual classroom libraries. Brainstorm ways that your public library can truly become the heart of the community. What can be done so that students and community members feel that space belongs to them? Ultimately, the goal of your activities should be to help people realize that the regular choice to engage in literate behavior is what allows us to learn more about ourselves and the world around us.

### **References**

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