



Moving Adolescents from Compliant Reading to Engaged Reading

by KELLY GALLAGHER

Reading to complete an assignment or to earn a grade should not be confused with the kind of reading we want to foster in adolescents. We want our students to love reading.



LITERACY CHAMPION: KELLY GALLAGHER

Kelly Gallagher taught high school English for 35 years and is the author of a number of books on engaging young readers and writers. Kelly is the former president of the Secondary Reading Group of the International

Literacy Association, and he continues to travel across the United States and Canada, speaking to educators.



One to Know: Moving Students into Engagement

There is a difference between compliant reading and engaged reading. Unfortunately, too many students have come to see reading only as an act of compliance. They read because they are assigned chapters to read; or to answer the teacher's questions; or to prepare themselves for writing an essay. For these students, reading has become a chore, a task to be completed to earn a desired grade.

How did we get here? Pedro Noguera, the dean of the University of Southern California's Rossier School of Education, says schools have been asking the wrong question: What can we do to raise reading achievement? This has led to repeated test prep practice, a sea of worksheets, and never-ending chapter quizzes, all of which have dampened the enthusiasm

of even our most ardent readers. Our nation’s ongoing obsession with testing—even in a pandemic!—has led directly to “readicide”—the systematic killing of the love of reading.

So how do we move students away from compliance and into engaged reading? How do we build “skilled, passionate, habitual, critical readers,” who read so much that they often need to “come up for air”? (Atwell). Instead of focusing on reading achievement, we need to pivot to what Noguera considers to be the right question: What can we do to challenge, stimulate, and engage our students?

What to Do: Taking Steps to Promote Engagement

How do we create classrooms where reading engagement becomes a central goal?

Here are some concrete steps:

- **Create a “book flood” in every classroom** (Elley). Engagement will not happen without access to interesting, diverse books. Building rich, compelling classroom libraries should be a continual, career-long project for all teachers. This is especially true for teachers who work with students who reside in print-poor homes and live in communities that lack libraries and bookstores.
- **Balance your students’ reading diet.** Reading in school should be more than students wrestling with one hard book after another. Readers need light reading to balance the heavy reading. Noted educator Nancie Atwell says there are three kinds of books in the world: “challenge” books, “just right” books, and “vacation” books. Kids should be reading all three kinds of books, both inside and outside of school.
- **Elevate independent reading back into prominence.** Independent reading is critical in building reading identity and stamina. As the National Council of Teachers of English has stated, “independent reading should be part of every K-12 curriculum. Research supports that independent reading has the most significant impact on student success in reading, but unfortunately it is a practice that is often replaced with other programs and interventions” (Lewis & Samuels). And for our college-bound students, we must remember that almost all reading at the university is independent. Are we adequately preparing our students for this challenge?
- **Provide choice in what to read.** The power of choice in creating engagement cannot be overstated. In my classroom, students were given complete choice (independent reading) or partial choice (book club selections) for at least 75% of their reading year. One-size-fits-all books do not often work in a classroom of divergent reading abilities and interests.
- **Walk the walk.** Share your passion for reading with your students. I started each class with the Reading Minute. For the first minute of class, I shared something interesting that I was reading. I did this for the first month of school, and then my students signed up for the remaining days of the semester. Each class started with a student reading recommendation.
- **Build lots of opportunities for students to talk about their reading.** My most reluctant readers were much more likely to read in book clubs, knowing they would be asked to share their thinking with their peers. When reading independently, I often asked students to conduct short impromptu book commercials with one another in small groups.

- **Provide time in class to read.** As my friend, Penny Kittle, author of *Book Love*, says, “If students are not reading with us, they are not reading without us.” Establishing reading momentum inside of school helps to establish reading momentum outside of school. In my class, we began each period with ten minutes of reading. While students read quietly, I conferred with three or four readers each day.
- **Respect student thinking.** Don’t drown their reading in worksheets and chapter quizzes. Begin by having students generate their own thinking. Ask open-ended questions like, “What is worth talking about here?” or “What surprised you when you read this?”

Building engaged readers means we must pivot away from focusing on test scores. This is scary for some teachers, but let’s not forget that kids who read the most are the kids who read the best. I could always predict which of my students would do well on the state tests—it was always those with the most reading experience. If the focus remains on raising test scores, we will lose readers; however, if we shift our focus to engagement, we will build readers who will do just fine on the tests.

More to Know and Do:

There is a lot at stake here. Consider the findings of a recent study, which found...

...the act of reading, particularly engaged reading as opposed to the mechanics of reading, is a powerful predictor of life success by any measure. It is the best predictor of who goes to university regardless of socio-economic background and parental education. It is the best predictor of life income, career options, even life partner choices. And neuroscience is proving that reading fiction is one of the most powerful means of developing sympathetic individuals, with better social skills and higher levels of self-esteem, resulting in increasing self-improvement and prosocial behaviours. (Diakiw)

This is a call to bring pleasure back into the curriculum. For some teachers, this may necessitate a mind shift: instead of seeing ourselves as teachers of books, let’s start with the idea that we are teachers of readers. Let’s be responsive to the children sitting in our classrooms. To do this, let’s start with the right question: What can we do to challenge, stimulate, and engage our readers?

References

Atwell, Nancie, et al. (2016). *The Reading Zone: How to Help Kids Become Passionate, Skilled, Habitual, Critical Readers*. Scholastic.

Diakiw, by: Jerry, et al. “The Power of Engaged Reading.” EdCan Network, 26 June 2017, www.edcan.ca/articles/the-power-of-engaged-reading/.

Elley, Warrick. (1991). “Acquiring Literacy in a Second Language: The Effects of Books-Based Programs.” *Language Learning*. (3): 375-411.

“Independent Reading.” NCTE, ncte.org/statement/independent-reading/.

Kittle, Penny. (2013). *Book Love: Developing Depth, Stamina, and Passion in Adolescent Readers*. Heinemann.

Lewis, M., & Samuels, S. J. (2005). *Read more—read better? A meta-analysis of the literature on the relationship between exposure to reading and reading achievement*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.

How to reach Kelly Gallagher

kellygallagher.org • Follow him on Twitter: [@KellyGToGo](https://twitter.com/KellyGToGo).