

What's Interesting?

It is hard to read things we don't find interesting. You know it and I know it when we pick something to take with us on an airplane or when we face a deskful of obligations. But we may not always be aware of it when we assign reading for our students. Nor are we always thoughtful of the crucial role interest may take in our students' successes and failures in reading.

It is easy to perceive interest just as an idiosyncratic quirk of taste that might add an extra fillip of attention and energy to a reading task. We might think if we could tap that added attention and energy of our students, classes would run a little more smoothly, lessons would progress a bit faster, and we would all be happier while we sat together in the classroom.

Cognitive research, however, has started to teach us something more fundamental about reading. Readers actively construct meaning at the intersection of a text's words and the reader's prior experiences, knowledge, and goals organized in the reader's schema. It is through our schema that we make sense of what we read. In this view of reading, interest is the link between our highly personal sense-making mechanisms and the senses we make of the text. Interest is not just the heightening of attention. It is the very stuff from which we create attention and make meaning. A text that is uninteresting would not draw out our sense-making mechanisms and would therefore be meaningless to us.

Evoking Interest

If we want our students to want to attend to and make sense of texts, we must interest them in the texts. Only after we have evoked their sense-making mechanisms will they feel the need and be able to work on the skills and techniques that will lend precision and depth to their reading.

What then makes a bit of reading interesting? Interest is not, of course, an attribute of a text in itself but is an attribute of the reader in response to the text. Potentially, many kinds of relationships between reader and text may evoke interest. Too often, when we think of what texts might interest a reader, we think of only one kind of relationship, where the text speaks rather directly to the world that the student is already part of. The student then knows that world so well that we expect all the sense-making apparatus will be well in place and few challenges to meaning making will interfere with the simple pleasure of seeing one's worlds reflected on the page. But not all mirrors produce pleasing pictures, and one's reflection may not always be endlessly fascinating. Readings about students' neighborhoods, parents, and sports can hold the attention for a while, but not forever. Furthermore, although such familiar messages can be received through well-established schema, they may only gradually expand the student's repertoire of reading skills or enlarge the student's vision.

Internal Motivation

Other kinds of interest may engage students with a wider range of texts. The kind of student who has done well at school or who has from an early age been hooked on reading often will be interested in an assigned reading simply because it presents a puzzle within a school context, and the student has repeatedly found rewards in solving school puzzles. Students who find themselves in developmental English programs rarely share such a motivational pattern. They are more likely to see uncontexted school puzzles as occasions for pain and punishment. Nonetheless, once students start gaining successes in reading, no matter how late in the day, they may well delight in the increased power this grants them. Almost any text may then for a while be interesting, as long as it does not present insurmountable technical problems.

Another kind of interest I have seen expressed by college students, and that helps them reach beyond themselves towards unfamiliar texts, derives from the very act of being in college. Entry into college is for many students a great landmark, posting the entrance to a great world of the intellect, learning, and professionalism. Students feel the excitement in their bones and want to be part of the big time. They are ready to try to understand texts that are unfamiliar and difficult simply because they perceive these texts as college texts—the real stuff. At this biographical moment in college, most students are open to new ways of seeing, new ideas, and new levels of consciousness. They

understand, however fuzzily, that they are willingly entering an open playing field of knowledge. We should not waste this wonderful moment in their lives. Rather we should feed it.

Tapping into Career Interests

If students have any well-defined career goals, or even vague imaginations of the lives they would like to lead, these anticipated lives can evoke interest in several kinds of reading. At this transitional point in their lives, students are busily constructing the framework of knowledge that they believe they will need for the rest of their lives. They will be hungry for readings that they perceive as germane to their professional knowledge and craft. More broadly they will express interest in any reading they perceive as part of the lifestyle they are contemplating. If they imagine themselves becoming engineers or lawyers or accountants, they will also anticipate the tastes of engineers or lawyers or accountants. They will want to dress, eat, and read in the mode of their anticipated careers. This "anticipatory socialization," as sociologists call it, can be a powerful tool for helping students reach into broad ranges of reading that we usually consider part of the culture of the educated, a culture not necessarily synonymous with literary or high culture. *Scientific American* or *Forbes* may be more representative of the professional culture our students anticipate than *American Poetry Review*. The anticipation and choice of careers may also be the source of a further group of interesting texts: those that represent the world they are choosing, either to inform students of the byways of the lives they are choosing or to probe their as-yet unsettled choices.

Finally, reading is most immediately and deeply interesting if students see a connection between a text and some task they are currently engaged in or some question they are currently puzzling over. When they start to see these connections, they truly become hooked on reading, for then the reading becomes part of their active thinking at the moment. Whether students are wondering about questions of identity or how to survive at school or what to make of the behavior of their culturally diverse friends, they may discover within reading—even within apparently very difficult texts—new ideas and information to help them sort out what is on their minds. When that happens they become the archetypal "true students."

Each student's vision of self, personally important knowledge, and goals are different, built upon the uniqueness of individual biographies and characters. Yet it is just this individual self that must be engaged

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when we ask our students to read. Once that self is engaged, the skills we teach can enable the student to get more from the reading. If, however, personal interest is not engaged, there is no motive for reading or reading improvement—there is no reading.

As instructors of reading and instructors of writing who rely on students' reading, we must look for texts that will engage our students' interests—if necessary shallowly, but preferably deeply. Even more, we must help our students discover why they might be interested in a text that first seems alien to them. Once we help students see that a text contains something important for them, something really interesting, then they'll learn to cross the mountains of difficulty that stand between them and what you can't stop them from wanting. That is interesting.

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