

## Essay 2

### Read Books. Every Day. Mostly for Pleasure.

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Lars writes about how he's angry with Chuck Palahniuk for making him think about the characters in *Survivor* long after he has closed the book. Vicki writes that she is upset with Victor Hugo for not allowing her to be a normal teenage girl, one interested in boys and pizza. Instead, she's worried about how to find compassion in a world often devoid of it after reading *Les Misérables*. Rit is excited that he is now reading more challenging books and that really good literature can also contain action, guns and violence. He writes that he didn't know the two could coexist. Sara thanks Maya Angelou for the advice given in *Letters to My Daughter*, Kira wonders if she should listen to the story of Santiago, the shepherd in Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*, and follow her passion for art, while Sand is in shock that after keeping track of everything she has read in one 18-week semester, it comes to a total of 25 independently read novels.

Sustained silent reading. Drop everything and read. Free voluntary reading. It doesn't matter what you call it, the concept is essentially the same: give students time to read. As an IB English teacher, I worried about how to carve out the time. The IB programme – an international curriculum with tough standards and exams – is the epitome of a high-stakes test. It's an intense curriculum to teach and there isn't much time to get through everything the IB demands. Like many of you, I am also judged by the scores my students receive on their IB exam. Although these test scores are not tied to pay, advancement or personal performance just yet, it is a factor in how I am viewed as an educator by parents, students and the administration.

But the more I tuned out the noise from the high-stakes testing world and the more I tuned in to the hum of literacy experts, the more they kept advocating for independent reading. Stephen D. Krashen in *The Power of Reading: Insights from the Research*, Richard Allington in *What Really Matters for Struggling Readers: Designing Research Based Programs* and Nancie Atwell in *The Reading Zone: How to Help Kids Become Skilled, Passionate, Habitual, Critical Readers* all make strong and compelling cases for independent reading. I'm a fan of Allington's chapter headings as they are commonsensical, logical and clear-cut: 'Kids need to read a lot'; 'Kids need books they can read'; 'Kids need to learn to read fluently'; 'Students need to develop thoughtful literacy' (Chapters 2–5). As I read these writers' work, I struggled

to dispute their claims; there is a literal power to reading. It convinced me that I had to make sure students were reading (and doing so often) because reading is the game changer in English education.

If you are currently seeking to create a culture of reading, my goal is to convince you that you, too, can make the joys of reading come alive in your classroom in several simple, easy steps. If you have already created a culture of reading, kudos to you. This essay will bring together what you do in a straightforward and coherent manner. I want to argue passionately about the benefits of providing an authentic and rich reading experience in your classroom, whether you teach IB, advanced classes or remedial English, or anything in between. Imagine a world where students are confident, capable, enthusiastic lifelong readers.

### **Business plan: creating an independent reading programme**

Before anything else, let me suggest that you start with a master plan for making independent reading a reality in your classroom. Thinking with this end in mind – I want students to be devouring books of their choice every day – I needed to come up with a system to make that happen. That overall strategy is my independent reading programme. Regie Routman in *Reading Essentials: The Specifics You Need to Teach Reading Well* makes it clear that an independent reading programme has never been ‘just find a book and read’. Instead, it is a thoughtful, strategic and carefully implemented plan of action (p. 83). This business plan is also constantly changing because any business that wants to stay solvent is flexible and adaptable. This is what I do now. It won’t be what I do five years from now, and may not even be what I am doing next semester. But I will always have a plan for independent reading.

When Penny Kittle came to what was then my current school, International School Bangkok, in January 2012, I didn’t have a plan. Yes, I was giving students time to read books of their choice and I had a decent classroom library, but I didn’t have a clear focus. Krashen convinced me that reading is good for you; Kittle taught me to take it to the next level. She showed us some of her own work with reading, which was the framework for her inspiring book, *Book Love: Developing Depth, Stamina and Passion in Adolescent Readers*.

My independent reading plan begins with the concept that if I think it is important, I must devote class time to it. Not giving students time to read in class is a bit like a basketball coach expecting his or her players to be able to hit a bunch of free throws in a row without actually ever working on the skill in practice. In every class, I provide 15 minutes of uninterrupted reading time. I am adamant about giving

this time to students in each class. Other teachers and researchers provide even more time – entire lessons, units of study and whole semesters – to choice reading.

Atwell makes this plea to high school English teachers in *The Reading Zone*. She begins Chapter 9 by writing ‘Now, when I run into them [students], I’ve learned not to ask “So, what are you reading?”’ (p. 106). Why? Because, as she explains, most high school students aren’t allowed to read what interests them.

While my classroom is not perfect – and Atwell and others may still understandably disagree with any curriculum that doesn’t allow for full voice and choice – anyone can now step in and have a spirited conversation with Gina about her love for science fiction, listen to Lauren passionately discuss the thematic ideas in Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, or have an intellectual discussion with Owain about the political motifs in Alan Moore’s *Watchmen*. However you choose to set up your independent reading programme, the key is to have a plan, starting with allocating substantial chunks of time.

At the high school level, I also expect students to read an additional two to three hours a week at home. Reika, a twelfth grader, tells me one day mid-semester that I have tricked her; she’s reading more than is required because she likes the books and can’t put them down. Setting up the initial parameters allows students to go beyond expectations and it provides a venue for reading to become a lifelong pursuit. After setting aside non-negotiable reading time, I have two other parts to my independent reading plan, neither of which I will claim as my own; rather, they are a compilation and modification of the work of others I have read. Part one is a list which students create of all the books they have read that semester, ranking them from most to least difficult. I picked this up from Kittle, who learnt it from Teri Lesesne in her book, *Reading Ladders: Leading Students from Where They Are to Where We’d Like Them to Be*. The first time I did this, I set the expectation of 25 independent reading books over the year. Next time, students will set their own individual reading goals while I will explain to them the importance of stamina and challenge. And because they now know I give time in class to read and expect them to continue to do so at home, they come to believe that 25 books is not an insurmountable number.

Part two of my plan is what constantly changes. The first time I did this, students answered three questions in depth: How have you built a reading life? How have you grown as a reader? How have you changed as a reader? Some students uploaded videos to YouTube while others went the more traditional

route and submitted a word-processed paper. A few even interviewed each other. The following semester, students wrote a letter to an author listed on their ladder instead of answering the three questions listed above. The guidelines given to students by the Library of Congress in 'Letters about Literature' are simply 'Read a book, poem or speech and write to that author (living or dead) about how the book affected [you] personally'. Partly to keep it fresh for students and partly because I keep changing and evolving, I'll do something different next semester. Michael Pollan, in his book *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto*, states: 'Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants' (p. 1). It's his thesis and what drives his thinking. It seems that we should have a thesis for independent reading. Read books. Every day. Mostly for pleasure.

### **Marketing strategy: Book talks, book talks and more book talks**

Students are hit by advertisements every day. The question for me is: what message do I want to be sending them? If companies are calculating, precise and specific in their advertising, then I want to be the same; I want to market books aggressively to students, and book talks – two- to three-minute trailers about the text – play a pivotal role in that strategy.

Daily book talks help me send a clear message about what matters in class: reading. Whether I am talking about a book or the librarian is coming to class to provide a sneak peek at several texts, whether one student is speaking to the whole class or a small group of students are chatting to each other about a book, every time they walk into my class, students will hear a book talk. Like expert marketers, I need to think critically about how I am promoting reading. Routman in *Reading Essentials* makes a strong case for sharing your reading life with students, including talking about what you are reading and making your reading life visible (p. 23). Book talks are my chance to demonstrate that reading matters to me; reading is a part of who I am.

Part of a book talk often, but not always, includes a short read-aloud. My seniors beg me to read inappropriate passages and I've become quite fond of trying to find the most scintillating section of a book that will hook students but not get me fired; Junot Díaz's latest collection of short stories, *This Is How You Lose Her*, was almost my downfall. But there was Shahar a couple of days later checking the book out of the library because Jessie, an avid reader, was already ploughing through my copy. Shahar, a reluctant reader who abandons books he doesn't like at a remarkable rate, loved it.

Some of the best recommendations come from other patrons. Once you build an independent reading programme, the students become a wealth of knowledge. Leeann just finished *Room* by Emma Donoghue and needed to get the book to her friend Grace. She quietly caught Grace's attention, silently mouthed a few words to her, slipped the book out of her backpack so Grace could see it, all while I watched in silent amusement as they sat down to take a quiz. It was important to Leeann that Grace read that book – now, not tomorrow. Book talks don't require any bells or whistles. Instead, talking to students about why you connected with a text is a powerful tactic to convince them to share that experience with you. Between friends, sometimes a quick glance and a nod of the head is enough to sell it.

### **Professional discussions: reading conferences**

In every class, during the 15-minute independent reading time, I confer with as many students as possible about their reading. Conducting conversations of three to five minutes with students about their independent reading books gives them the feeling that their reading matters to me too.

Everyone, from my curriculum coordinator to Kittle, pushed me to confer. I refused. I liked spending the 15 minutes of reading time I gave students to read my own book, to model myself to students as a reader. I worried about hypocrisy; high school students can smell it in an instant.

Until I saw what was possible, I wasn't willing to change. After seeing some of Kittle's reading conferences in action, I was convinced that I wanted to know my students as readers. I was envious of the knowledge she had about my students just by talking to them about what they were reading. Yes, they were reading and given time to read books of their choice. Yet I had no clue about their tastes, abilities and capabilities. I wasn't challenging them either, pushing them – when needed – to read more difficult books.

Three things must be at your disposal going into each reading conference: your conferring notes, the questions themselves and an open ear. Kittle in *Book Love*, Atwell in *The Reading Zone*, Lucy McCormick Calkins in *The Art of Teaching Reading* and Carl Anderson in *How's It Going: A Practical Guide to Conferring with Student Writers* can show you how to make conferring a hallmark of your teaching.

It was a steep learning curve, but now I can't imagine not talking to my students about their books. After finishing *Atonement* by Ian McEwan, Meagan came to class with a list of questions and topics she wanted

to discuss with me in her writer's notebook. I didn't require her to write about the book; I didn't ask her to complete any journals or log entries; I didn't ask her to do anything more than read a book of her choice. Here she was, though, going above and beyond my expectations, not for a grade but because she genuinely wanted to discuss the complexities of McEwan's style, the thematic ideas presented and the troubling characters that he created. Writing it down helped her sort out her ideas. Because I confer with students about their reading, they know and expect literary conversations to take place regularly. And no, I haven't read *Atonement*. But I do know how to talk about books, how to ask probing questions and how to listen so that Meagan – or anyone else – can explore their thoughts about the book with an interested adult.

### **Products: the books themselves**

Students need books that are accessible and engrossing. My business plan will fail if students can't see the products themselves. Ploy, a twelfth grader, needs to touch the books, needs to eye the front and back covers, needs to flip the pages through her fingertips. She wants to get an intuitive feel for the book she is about to read. But most of all, Ploy, and every other student in my class, must have books around them. A catalogue just doesn't cut it. Donalyn Miller in *The Book Whisperer: Awakening the Inner Reader in Every Child* talks in detail about how to start, maintain and enhance a classroom library (pp. 183–9). I've learnt a great deal from her and she's the most helpful go-to professional when you are ready to create your own library. Routman argues that classroom libraries are a necessity, a top priority because students read more when they have easy access to books (p. 64). It makes sense. When students see books, they want to check them out. Angus sticks around one Friday afternoon to ask if I have any more books by Japanese writers. He was on a Haruki Murakami kick and looking for something new for the weekend. I give him *The Sailor Who Fell From Grace With the Sea* by Yukio Mishima. Would Angus be reading that weekend if I didn't have a classroom library? I don't know, but I do know that because I have one, he left with a book in his hand.

My library has a mix of young adult fiction, adult fiction, nonfiction, creative nonfiction, memoirs, anthologies of poetry, short stories and any other text or title that students want to read. If students are surrounded by a wide range and selection of books, they are more likely to read. A classroom library helps your students build and maintain that reading life. Meet them where they are so you can take them where they need to go.

**Floor plan: the reading sanctuary**

Creating a warm and inviting reading atmosphere helps to set the mood for an enjoyable 15 minutes of reading. While not everyone has this luxury, anything you do can help. A couch. A beanbag. Throw pillows. A rug. Plants. Natural light. Whatever you can find that creates an inviting mood to read, use it. Businesses know this and the best of them suck the credit card right out of your wallet. The same is true for reading.

I have what I call the 'Reading Sanctuary', aptly named by students one year. I am lucky enough to teach in a big room. I cordoned off a space by the windows, obtained a three-seat couch, one chair, and eight beanbags along with a large rug that I place in the middle of it all. Just don't take Anjali's seat in period one – it's on the far left side of the couch – or the pillow that she clutches. Eng has tried it; he knows better now. In other words, it is a sacred place for my students and me. There is also a communal feel to the space, as we are becoming a community of readers, sitting together in silence, but knowing that each one of us is engaged in the same activity of losing ourselves in a good book. I find that students respect the area, tend not to eat or drink near it, and come to associate reading with a relaxing and comfortable feeling. They want to come back, day after day. And on top of everything else, they find reading to be fun again, something to enjoy.

**Checkout: creating a culture of reading**

You now have a shopping cart full of items to help you create a vibrant independent reading programme, one that will help you create a culture of reading. At this point, I hope you are inspired to make independent reading a significant part of your language arts programme. It will require you to work out some kinks, to play around with my ideas and suggestions, and to find a system that works for you. I'm also not naive enough to think that any of this work is truly my own. I'm trying to build on what other teachers and researchers have taught me. Read them. Learn from them, as I have, to help inform you. Having students choose their own books, create their own goals, talk to me about what they are reading, recommend winning books to peers and submit a reflective assessment about their reading life in a classroom surrounded by books in an inviting atmosphere has dramatically changed my teaching. Sasanan Trakansuebkul (Sand), the young woman I mentioned at the start who read 25 books in 1 semester after hardly reading at all in 11th grade, writes, 'and before I knew it, the next thing I remembered was becoming an addict, always with a book glued to my face'. She's off to University College London to



study biology, but she has left high school as a confident, capable, enthusiastic lifelong reader. That's the power of independent reading.

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