

Reading Don't Fix No Chevys (Yet!)

MOTIVATING BOYS IN THE AGE OF THE COMMON CORE

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Boys underperform girls on measures of reading, and things could get worse if we adopt the instructional ideas suggested by authors of the Common Core State Standards and neglect the power of pleasure.

Although the data may be more complicated than they appear (Smith & Wilhelm, 2009), research clearly establishes that boys underperform in literacy relative to girls. The most recent example of this underperformance is the latest NAEPs, reported in 2014, on which a full 25% of boys scored below the basic level and just 37% at or above proficient, compared to 40% in 1992. Despite years of reforms, boys' achievement in literacy has not improved. Because the PARCC and Smarter Balanced assessments of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are designed to be more rigorous than existing tests, we strongly suspect that this trend will continue. But there's more to the problem than underperformance on standardized tests: If boys reject reading, they will not be able to experience the manifold pleasures and the potential for growth that reading offers.

If boys are to be successful on the new gen-



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eration of assessments and if they are to become lifelong readers and civically engaged democratic citizens, they must be motivated to embrace instruction designed both to prepare them for success and to experience the pleasure and power of reading. Here's the good news: We believe that teachers will be most effective both in helping their students achieve the Common Core and in developing a love for reading through inquiry-oriented approaches that boys find highly motivating (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; 2006). Here's the bad: The authors of the standards have been advocating a kind of instruction that is radically at odds with what we have learned about what motivates young men.

In this commentary we'll review the key findings of our *Chevys* study, supplementing the work we did there with one of our more recent projects, examine how what we found stacks up against the instructional ideas being proffered by David Coleman and other authors of the CCSS, and suggest alternative approaches to achieving the CCSS that are more in-line with what we've learned.

What We've Learned About Motivating Boys

Our work in *Chevys*, a study that examined the literate lives of a very diverse group of 49 adolescent

boys both in school and out, was informed by Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) notion of flow experiences, experiences so engaging that we lose track of time when we are involved in them. Csikszentmihalyi isn't interested in cataloging what experiences foster flow. Rather his focus is on what flow experiences have in common. He identified eight characteristics of flow experience that we collapsed into four. And then our data made us add a fifth. We found that these five characteristics of flow experiences explained why boys chose to do what they chose to do both in and out of school: a sense of competence and control, an appropriate challenge, clear goals and feedback, a focus on the immediate, and the importance of the social.

The Importance of Competence and Control

A focus on competence and control was the linchpin of motivation for the boys in our study. A quick contrast in two boys' feelings about one literate activity, using computers, provides an illustration. Buda embraced the use of computers because "I'm very good with computers... and my parents and my brother [are] always asking me what does this do and how do you do this and, it's just fun." Buster, in contrast, rejected them because "they're too complicated for me I guess."

We saw the same emphasis on competence in the research we did for *Reading Unbound* (Wilhelm & Smith, 2014), our recent study of the nature and variety of pleasure avid adolescent and young adult readers of genres typically marginalized in schools (romances, vampire novels, horror, dystopian fiction, and fantasy) experience in their out-of-school reading. Kids read to deepen existing areas of expertise. Many of them read deeply in particular genres (e.g., horror, graphic novels, dystopias). Doing so allowed them to develop their competence. Here's Paul talking about his expertise in reading *Tintin*, one of his favorite series of graphic novels:

My friends will kind of blow through a comic book or a graphic novel and I'll just be going slow and they'll be wondering what's up with me because I like to look at most of the details in the

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pictures like even in these small panels where I notice that he [the author] has a picture on the wall and he drew the picture very detailed like right there he's got the picture on the wall.

It's clear that feelings of expertise are motivating. Unfortunately, as we explore in another recent project (Smith, Appleman, & Wilhelm 2014), authors and proponents of the standards, David Coleman chief among them, do not seem to recognize the motivating power of competence. When he explains how he would teach Martin Luther King's "Letter From Birmingham Jail" (Coleman, 2011) he starts by "attacking" (his word) teachers' use of prereading activities, instead encouraging them to "dive" (Porter-Magee, 2012) immediately into texts. He seems to be content that "clever" students will understand a text from the outset in a way other students do not, though he believes that ultimately students will develop some shared understandings.

Unfortunately, this belief does not jibe with what we discovered in our research. The young men in our study needed to feel a developing competence in and rewarded by their reading right from the outset. If they didn't, they'd shut down.

The boys in our study also wanted to exercise control over their reading. Indeed, some of them went so far as to say that it's not the book so much that fosters enjoyment but rather the power to choose the book. As one reluctant reader put it: "I don't like it if I have to read [a book], but if I read it on my own then it would probably seem a little better."

Once again, what we found in *Chevys* was supported by what we found in *Reading Unbound*. Our informants felt empowered by their freely chosen reading because it gave them a sense of being an agentive person who made meaningful and satisfying choices. Unfortunately, we see no recognition of the importance of student choice in the CCSS themselves or in the instructional ideas David Coleman and his colleagues are advocating.

Appropriate Challenge

The second condition of flow that we explored is the importance of providing an appropriate challenge. Here's Haywood:

I like a book that isn't easy but it's not so difficult that you don't understand what is going on. Because if you are reading a book that doesn't make sense to you... you have negative attitude and you don't concentrate and you don't really gain anything from the experience.

Our worry about the CCSS is that the emphasis on text complexity may realize Haywood’s fear. At the same time, this emphasis doesn’t recognize the extraordinary interpretive work that the informants in *Reading Unbound* did with texts that on the surface may seem simple—romances, vampire stories, horror, fantasies, and the like.

The engaged readers in *Reading Unbound* were meeting all the Core reading standards through their free reading. If students are enacting the standards with texts of their own choosing, if they are achieving interpretive complexity, then we’d argue that we shouldn’t be so concerned with foisting texts with particular features upon them.

Clear Goals and Feedback

The third condition of flow is clear goals and immediate feedback. The boys in our *Chevys* study were not able to discern such goals for and did not experience such feedback from the reading they were asked to do inside of school. Here’s a statement from Rev that haunts us to this day: “English is about NOTHING! It doesn’t help you DO anything!”

Our *Reading Unbound* (2014) study has helped us understand the work reading does for students. They read to become better writers and more knowing conversationalists. Most movingly, they saw reading as a way to become better and more complete people. One of them put it this way: “I learn about myself through books when I imagine myself in the different situations.... It’s learning about what you could be.”

Our findings heighten our previous concerns with the “schoolishness” of school that we explore in *Chevys*—that school purposes don’t connect “tool-ishly” to actions in the real world. We’re afraid that students see the CCSS as ends in themselves instead of understanding that achieving them will help them do work that matters in the here and now.

A Focus on the Immediate

A fourth condition of flow is a focus on the immediate. The boys in our study had different interests. We could identify only one that was widely shared: music (though the kind of music the boys enjoyed varied widely). The boys’ interest in music was largely a function of how they could throw themselves into it. Here’s how one of our participants put it: “I like listening to [music] when I’m really mad because it helps me just like feel what I’m actually feeling.”

The kind of immersive pleasure the boys in *Chevys* experienced from their music was very similar to the kind of pleasure the readers in *Reading Unbound* talked about. What mattered to those readers was the intense and immediate experience their reading brought them. In contrast, the CCSS are future-oriented. They’re designed to help kids become college and career ready. But our studies have convinced us that we can’t prepare kids for the future unless we engage them experientially in the present.

The Importance of the Social

A final condition, and the only one that we added to Csikszentmihalyi’s notion of flow, is the importance of the social. As one boy said: “It’s always better with friends—always!” Once again, we found a similar sentiment in our interviews for *Reading Unbound*. Those readers used their reading both to declare identity and social affinity. Here’s what one of them said: “I usually, when someone comes over my house, I’ll say, ‘You need to read this book,’ and I’ll let them borrow it. Or make them borrow it.”

So What to Do: Creating Contexts for Motivation and Pleasure

The importance of motivation is impossible to over-emphasize, especially for the young men who might be alienated from reading for one reason or another. Given what we know about flow, any instruction that provides students with visible signs of accomplishment and evolving competence, engages and assists them to meet appropriate challenges, provides clear goals and immediate feedback, pays off in the here and now, and allows them to do meaningful social work is going to be highly motivating. Inquiry—construed as the apprenticeship into expertise—necessarily meets all these conditions of flow (Smith & Wilhelm, 2006).

Inquiry at the Macrolevel

At the macrolevel of curriculum and instruction we have long argued for framing curricular topics as a problem to be solved through the use of essential questions (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Wilhelm, 2007; Smith & Wilhelm, 2010, Smith, Appleman, & Wilhelm, 2014). Doing so clearly meets the condition of flow that learning will have a clear purpose and continuous feedback about how the purpose is being fulfilled. This subsequently leads to meeting all the other conditions of flow.

Inquiry Methods at the Microlevel

What we call frontloading (Wilhelm, Baker, Dube, 2001; Smith, Appleman, & Wilhelm, 2014) is the beginning of an instructional sequence. We argue that it is the most important move we can make as teachers because frontloading allows us to prepare students for success rather than remediating feelings of incompetence or failures that undermine motivation.

Frontloading is any activity or set of activities that activate students' prior knowledge and interests that relate to the new curricular challenge. Frontloading also sets a purpose for taking on the new challenge, forges personal connections to the task at hand, and provides a template for gauging progress. Frontloading activates and builds both conceptual and procedural resources that are necessary for success on a new challenge.

Materials that Foster Inquiry

One last consideration we want to take up is that of the materials we use for whole or small group instruction, and those we make available to or encourage students to choose on their own. We worry that the power of the text exemplars provided in the Core Standards document is so great that many schools are going so far as to require them for classroom use. This is a misunderstanding of the document itself, which expresses that the lists are meant to provide *examples* to orient teachers to the issue of text complexity and the kinds of text quality that the CCSS authors consider appropriate for a particular grade level.

The examples themselves are also problematic. It's important to understand that they were chosen not necessarily because they were the best examples, but because the excerpts needed to be in the public domain, both to provide ease of access and to control costs (see Short, 2013). We argue for the selection of more engaging and relevant texts, and for the provision of both limited choice and free choice reading as part of the classroom project.

If our goal is to promote deep and engaged learning, and to support motivated lifelong readers who can create and sustain their own reading lives and who can employ the strategies highlighted in the Core, then the last thing we need to do is limit teachers' or students' reasons for reading, strategies

for reading, or materials for reading. What we do need to do is highlight purposes and applications, teach strategies in that context of use, and use a wide variety of texts that can be read by all, by small groups, or by individuals in ways that will allow those readers to bring unique contributions to the common inquiry project that is at hand.

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