Motivating Reading

Three thousand high school students drop out of school everyday. The statistics are perilous. Teachers lack the abilities and tools to motivate students to become better readers and more engaged in their content area classes.

The widely-circulated piece, "Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy," prepares a platform for much-needed attention to Grades 5-12 reading demands and the instruction to support it.

Between instructional and infrastructure elements, 15 key areas, including direct, explicit comprehensive instruction, strategic tutoring, and ongoing formative assessment of students, were identified for action and continued research. Educators and researchers can overcome the challenges of 14 of the 15 elements identified, but "motivation" (student self-directed learning), is the most difficult and, perhaps, the most important. Without developing motivation, the other 14 elements lose context, and I believe one of the other 15 elements, "technology," holds the key to developing motivation

Motivation means having the desire and willingness to do something. Teachers, if they want to motivate students to stay on task, increase their knowledge and skills and improve their ability to process information, must guide the initiation, direction, intensity, and persistence of learning behavior. But how do we as educators do that?

Most researchers agree on the following five key factors that impact motivation:

■ **Challenge** Students are motivated when they are working toward personally meaningful goals whose attainment requires activity at a continuously optimal level of difficulty. This condition is known as the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky) and is vital to the learning process. To increase the level of engagement, students must be provided with learning tasks that continue to be interesting, meaningful and at least somewhat culturally relevant at a level of difficulty that is challenging but within reach. An example might be the girl practicing "shooting hoops" alone. From lay ups to three-pointers, she decides what is the appropriate level of difficulty. She has been "coached" on how to self-assess, analyze, and monitor mistakes.

■ **Interest** Motivation is impacted by the learner's level of interest in the activity. An optimal level of discrepancy between present knowledge and skills, and what could be if the learner became engaged in the activity, will influence motivation for the task. Novelty also initiates interest. When the activity is novel, the learner may become curious about engaging in a new learning experience. A sense of wonder is crucial to the learning process because it fosters a desire for more information. For example, a student may be unmotivated to learn Latin and Greek cognates, prefixes, and suffixes, but when contextualized by history, a compelling story like Homer's *The Odyssey*, or a game-show-like competition, their interest becomes attached to something meaningful.

■ **Level of Concern** Even the most disenfranchised student will respond to a concern for their progress and well being as people as well as learners. Students need to have consistent and authentic feedback. Noted educator, Madeline Hunter, called it "knowledge of results." Teachers and instructional tools should convey high expectations (letting students know "what good looks like") and provide frequent assessments (something that shows small increments of growth) to sustain students' motivation and provide a supportive and responsive classroom culture. For example, teachers' current focus on formative assessments provides meaningful data for student-teacher and teacher-parent discussion.

Quality Quinn recognizes the value of technology in motivating students to read

■ **Success** When students discover or are put in a situation to feel satisfaction and accomplishment, it initiates motivation or continues it. Feelings of success strengthen achievement in any area: athletics, academics, or social situations. Instruction must include powerful opportunities for success such as scaffolding and guided practice and, in certain cases, this instructional support must overcome some students' strong self-inflicted failure messaging.

■ **Reward** Students, like everyone else, are motivated by rewards for their efforts. Rewards come in many forms but schools tend toward material rewards (in Texas, during state assessments, when you hand out the number two pencils, the kids smell pizza!) or the reward of no punishment, i.e., If you do this, you won't have to stay after school, take remedial reading, write an essay, do a report, etc. While external rewards and recognition (your name on the good list, not the bad) go a long way, good instruction must provoke a learner toward an intrinsic reward system that leads to self-directed learning. This is a difficult thing to measure or even observe, but teachers that create environments that allow students to experience the internal reward of "I've got it" or "I'm getting better" or "This is easier than I thought" are promoting motivation.

Given these five motivation-influencing elements, the case can be made that the teachers' shoulders are not broad enough to assess (mixes of intervention elements), design, and apply supplemental reading and writing to every below-level reader at the appropriate level of difficulty. However, when you examine the fundamental strengths of information technology — specifically software — its ability to store, respond, differentiate, aggregate, and disaggregate in vivid, multimodal ways, it is clear that motivation and technology are a "natural pairing." If you don't believe the research, ask a student. As one student boldly put it, "The computer doesn't think I'm stupid!"

By now, grade 5-12 teachers are beginning to receive professional development on research-based reading instruction, and by the sweat of this literacy consultant's (and others') brows, many middle and high school content teachers are adding the Apprentice model of reading and writing in their respective content areas. But, in many cases, below-level readers are shunted off to remedial classes with every ameliorative name under the sun, collecting points as they cycle through various stations and suffering through more whole-class or small group instruction, undriven by formative assessment just a lack of adequate yearly progress. This is not motivating.

So, the question is begged: What is the highest and best use of