

Seven Habits of Highly Effective Teachers of Reading

BY VICKI LUTHER



In 1989, Stephen R. Covey introduced us to a book entitled *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. This book has sold millions of copies and is still widely used today. Its popularity is evidenced by the fact that Covey's principles have become a mainstay in many of the country's top companies. In the book, Covey challenges readers to change their lives, and subsequently better their lives, by embodying seven primary habits into every day events. Although the book's lessons can be beneficial to most anyone, the book is used most frequently by leaders of business.

I have been familiar with this book for years; it was first introduced to me by a professor in a graduate course. However, I never really thought much about it or its implications until recently when I came across a copy of it at a book store, flipped it open, and started to read. It was easy for me to recognize the power of Covey's work and why so many individuals use this book as an aide to enhance their success. As I thumbed through the pages and perused through Covey's advice, I began to see a correlation between his "habits" and the attributes that we as teachers of reading must possess. As a former elementary school teacher and now as an educator of pre-service teachers, I can say with certainty that there is

no more important job than that of a teacher of reading. As I read through the habits, I began thinking about the fact that teachers must exhibit strong positive habits and traits in order that their students, year after year, become fluent, independent, and lifelong readers. Without positive habits, reading instruction will suffer and student potential could be wasted. At that moment, questions began to fill my head: What are seven habits of highly effective teachers of reading? How can Covey's insight be used to enhance the teaching of reading? Using the same framework of Covey's seven habits, I started to think about what each habit may look like for those who teach reading skills to children on a daily basis.

Habit 1: Be Proactive

To be great teachers of reading requires that we are proactive. We need to be aware of students' needs before they become great concerns. It is important that we use observational tools to notice any changes in the behaviors, attitudes, or academic abilities of our students. Teachers who constantly monitor students have a greater chance of noticing potential problems early on. Being proactive allows teachers of reading the ability to offer various strategies and learning tools, such as one-on-one tutoring.

Assessing what students know and can do is the first step in becoming proactive. Without first assessing the students, we will not be able to adequately teach the students to the best of our abilities. As Reutzel and Cooter (2009) surmise, "The goal of literacy assessment should be to provide sufficient information for teachers to make decisions about "next steps" for students in their literacy learning, and for the selection of effective, evidence-based teaching strategies" (p. 11). Assessment must be conducted frequently in order to understand the growth and progress of students. For the effective teacher of reading, the journey is just as important as the destination. We must look at the processes children go through to become proficient in their literacy skills. "Classroom assessment should be broadly interpreted to allow examination of students' literacy processes as well as the products they create" (Reutzel & Cooter, 2009, p. 11). We should look for improvements, albeit small improvements, in order to recognize growth, and we must constantly look at those areas of literacy in which students are struggling. The effective teacher monitors all students closely and carefully and is proactive in knowing the students and their needs.

Habit 2: Begin with an End in Mind

In his book, Covey (1989) says that this habit is "based on the principle that all things are created twice" (p. 99). Covey goes on to explain that there is always a mental creation, then a physical creation, for everything. Long before a new school year (or semester, or unit) begins, many teachers create a mental picture of what they expect. Because we may enjoy reading as a leisure activity, we expect that all children will, too, and we bask in the idea that all of our students will meet-and even exceed- all the required standards before the school year is out. We plan and prepare, and are often extremely positive in our thinking. It is important that teachers go into the classroom with high expectations for each and every child and with the confidence that great strides will be seen in all students. This is why the teacher of reading should develop a habit of beginning with the end in mind. In recent years, the terms "Understanding by Design" or "Backward Design" have begun to emerge. As educators, we should know what we want the end result to be before any plans have been made (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). The effective teacher knows where he or she wants the students to be at the end of the journey. When we begin with the end in mind, we have set goals to work toward and this will help us to accomplish great things in the classroom.

Yet while having an optimistic view of our students is critical, we must also be realistic in the understanding that children are all different. Our plans will not always go according to how we would like them to go; students will not always learn at the same pace, our lessons may fall flat, and daily demands of teaching may cause us to stress. The teacher of reading should always have the motto that all children can learn, but not all children will learn in the same way or in the same interval of time. We must never forgo the education of our students in order to meet our goals and expectations. The effective teacher identifies what the students must be taught but understands that the learning process cannot be rushed. Therefore, the effective teacher of reading must begin with the end in mind to set goals to work toward, but must be realistic of those goals.

Habit 3: Put First Things First

Covey (1989) describes "effective management" as putting first things first (p. 148). Effective teachers of reading must have skills to create classroom communities and must also have the ability to organize and supervise the happenings of the classroom so that all students have the ability to learn in a safe environment (Snow, Griffin, & Burns, 2005). Teachers must be thorough in the thinking of the classroom layout in order to achieve the goals of a successful reading program (Reutzel & Cooter, 2009).

As teachers of reading, it is important that we create collaborative communities so that our students can learn not only from us but also from one another. Children must feel secure as they develop reading skills. In order to create a positive classroom environment, we must have faith in ourselves and in those students in our care. We have to realize that we are, each moment of the day, molding and shaping our students' lives. We must respect our students enough to handle ourselves, and our classrooms, in the most productive ways. It is as equally important to be a "self-manager" as it is to be a "classroom manager."

Habit 4: Think Win/Win

Every teacher has heard about and is familiar with federal and state guidelines, the *No Child Left Behind* legislation, and Adequate Yearly Progress. These words have become so commonplace in our educational system that we almost treat them as "background noise." But what does it truly mean when we educate all children in the skills of reading? When we teach students how to be proficient readers, we are giving them hope for a better future. Effective

teachers of reading must make it a habit of remembering that doing the job well will serve as a win/win situation for our students, their families, our school systems, and society as a whole.

When we teach children the necessary processes needed to read for meaning, we are not just giving them the skills to pass a standardized test at the end of the year; instead, we are providing them with the ability to become more developed in their thinking skills, more advanced in their knowledge of other content areas, and more focused on their interests. Those who can read have opportunities afforded them that their illiterate contemporaries do not have. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2009), 23% of the fourth graders in the United States are reading below the basic standards, while 37% of fourth graders in the state of Georgia are reading below a basic rate. In his book *Illiterate America*, Kozol (1985) details how difficult it is for adults who do not know how to read to function in the general public. He goes on to discuss how a lack of reading skills can cost persons in yearly wages, self-esteem, basic understandings of our democratic system, and in advancements in the community in which they live (Kozol, 1985).

We are helping children to realize the gift of a brighter future when we teach them to read. Our main focus must be to create lifelong readers so that they will become productive members of society. This gives our communities, and our state, a better future. Children who can read become adults who can read, and that is a win/win for us all. No matter how difficult the challenges that are before us, we are impacting our society for the greater good when we patiently and lovingly teach our students to read. Our diligence can help students stay in schools and make positive advancements in their futures. Therefore, we must make it a habit to embrace our jobs and understand the important work that we do. We can make such a positive impact on our communities and on the future.

Habit 5: Seek First to Understand, Then to be Understood

The old saying is true: Children will not care how much we know until they know how much we care. If we do not attempt to understand the students, we are minimizing our role and their potential. Effective teachers of reading must be willing to understand how each child is different from the others, and must be willing to adapt the instruction to meet the needs of every child (Stronge, 2002). Most often, children do not come to us with an innate ability to value the guidance of adult-figures in their lives. They do not

comprehend why they cannot eat candy and ice cream in lieu of a meal, and they rarely have the ability to fully appreciate the gift that reading truly is. Often, students are excited about learning to read in the early grades, but, as time moves on, begin to look the reading process as a bore and a chore. This is why we must work to understand the students and their backgrounds. Children will never be able to understand our role in their learning process unless we are first able to identify with them.

In the past, teachers have been told that in order to show equality in the classroom, we must treat all students the same. This sentiment certainly does not yield success for those who are the teachers of reading! There is a large amount of literature (Fletcher, 2006; Sax, 2007; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Tyre, 2008) that reveals that girls are out-achieving boys when it comes to reading and literacy skills. Perhaps even sadder, boys tend to lose focus and interest in reading altogether. When boys, who are already behind in their word recognition or fluency skills, lose even the slightest interest in picking up the printed word, the results can be devastating.

Educators who value gender differences tend to have more students who want to read and write (Fletcher, 2006). Teachers of reading must remember that boys and girls do learn differently (Sax, 2007) and that boys tend to enjoy reading about much different topics than girls. Award-winning author Jon Scieszka was inspired to create a website known as "Guys Read" to encourage boys to become lifelong readers. This website lists the titles of books that boys, in particular, would find interesting (www.guysread.com). Cunningham (2005) encourages teachers to revisit their classroom libraries and printed materials to ensure that there is something for everyone. The books we offer children and the way we approach the teaching of reading can make a tremendous difference. Understanding that many students are reluctant to read and seeking to find initiative ways to make reading exciting and captivating can help change the hesitant reader to the more experienced one.

Teachers must also remember that not all children will come to school with the same background knowledge or prior experiences. The home situation can make a tremendous impact on learning. More and more children are living in poverty (Fass & Cauthen, 2007), and due to recent economic downturns and rising unemployment, this is a trend which may last for years. Children who live in poverty may bring a unique set of challenges to the

classroom (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000). Teachers of reading must understand that fear and worry greatly affects the comprehension, ability, and desire of the student to learn. Teachers must also be aware of each individual student's cultural and linguistic background. Culture plays a huge role in how students learn and what students expect to get from their reading development (Moll & Gonzales, 2004). Only when educators make all attempts to truly know the children in their care can they begin to teach students where they are and see the potential for how much they can accomplish.

Habit 6: Synergize

Covey (1989) characterizes synergy as the whole being greater than the sum of its parts. He goes on to explain that communicating synergistically allows one to open their "mind and heart and expressions to new possibilities, new alternatives, new options" (p. 264). The effective teacher of reading understands that the literacy learning processes can be somewhat messy and that demonstrating knowledge of said processes does not have to be done in the same exact way. Simply stated, we must be willing to allow our students to try new alternatives. Reading is "the whole," but how we assess students' reading development does not always have to be the same. We must think outside the box and must allow ourselves the ability to discover new and exciting ways to get students interested in the reading process.

Reutzel and Cooter (2009) worry that the tendency in our schools is to engage in a mentality of "one-size-fits all" reading instruction (p. 12). It is important to remember that this approach is detrimental, and teachers who realize that the same way does not always work for everyone will be more efficient in reaching all students. Because most schools are now equipped for technological resources, reading practices can take on various forms. We have to remember that although new approaches may be a bit daunting to us, for students these new alternatives can lead to an increased passion for literacy.

Habit 7: Sharpen the Saw

Maria Montessori (1966) once said, "We must be taught and we must be willing to accept guidance if we wish to become effective teachers" (p.149). The teacher of reading must never become stagnant in his or her presentation of the information and must ensure that students are actively engaged in the reading process. Research shows that there is a strong correlation between what teachers know about reading instruction and the achievement of the

students (Snow, Griffin, & Burns, 2005). Simply put, the teacher is the most important factor in the classroom; no curriculum, technological advancement, or even increased funding can take the place of a highly qualified teacher. Competent teachers are the key to effective reading instruction (Reutzel & Cooter, 2009).

As educators, we must make it a habit to be self-reflective and honest of our teaching practices. We must ask ourselves the tough questions: Is my instruction working for all of my students? Am I stuck in a "rut" in my teaching practices? Are my students excited about the process of reading? Am I excited about my teaching so that the students can be excited about what they are learning? Only when we are honest with ourselves can we truly improve. It is also important that we keep current with trends and evidenced-based instructional practices (Reutzel & Cooter, 2009). If we do not continue to "sharpen our saws," we will unfortunately allow our teaching, and our students' learning, to suffer. Effective teachers of reading keep active in professional literacy organizations, keep abreast of new developments in reading strategies and reading assessment tools, and are open to changing teaching techniques in order to meet the needs of the students.

Educators who are highly effective must never stop learning, never stop taking chances, and never stop enjoying the opportunity to teach reading skills to children. Reading is a very complex skill; therefore, the task of teaching students to be proficient readers can be extremely daunting. It is often easy for teachers to feel burned out, but it is critical that we remain positive and supportive of our students. We must keep our enthusiasm of the printed word, for when we lose our joy of reading, our students surely will, too.

Conclusion

Each day, teachers enter the classroom ready to educate the students entrusted into their care. The highly effective teacher of reading is one who knows the students, understands the role of the teacher, and is extremely familiar with the components of reading. Those who teach reading skills to children are to be commended and applauded for their gifts and talents. Teachers who demonstrate positive practices and habits tend to be extremely satisfied in their teaching accomplishments. Using Covey's principles can lead to successful teaching, and this will lead to greater gains for our students.

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