

How My Library Doubled Its Circulation

By Meghan Stigge on December 27, 2017

Modern life tends toward snippets of attention: push notifications and buzzing phones; multitasking and productivity hacks. Sustained focus can feel impossible, for high school students and adults.

A year ago, the English language arts (ELA) teachers at Shawnee Mission (KS) Northwest High School, where I am a librarian, were dispirited by the difficulty they were experiencing in motivating students to read the longer narratives on the curricular lists. Students weren't completing the assigned reading, and as a result, the related classroom activities and discussions were suffering. Teachers lamented that students weren't experiencing the positive outcomes that research has shown comes from a healthy long-form reading habit.

In his book *Deep Work* (Grand Central, 2016), computer scientist Cal Newport argues that sustained focus on a challenging cognitive task is the most valuable skill in our economy. And yet neuroscience research suggests that our hyper-networked world—of tweet feeds, texts, notifications, and multitasking—has a measurable impact on focus and attention.

Our classroom observations confirmed the research. So we embarked on a collaborative effort to bolster our reading culture. In less than a year, we've seen an astounding turnaround in circulation statistics and enthusiasm for reading. Here's how we did it.

THE MODEL

A handful of motivated ELA teachers and I met several times during the fall of 2016. We consulted the research and settled on a few foundational imperatives for our Reading Empathy Initiative.

- A revision of the required novel reading lists and the addition of high-interest, high-value contemporary works
- Student choice for independent reading—and instruction on how to find books of personal interest
- Time to choose and time to read

Teachers brought their classes to the library for instruction on how to find books of interest. I taught them how to use various digital tools: retailer recommendations based on similar books, our digital catalog, and online review sites such as Goodreads. I showed them how to find their selections, and students had browsing and checkout time.

Time is a critical piece of the process: time to search, time to browse, and time to read. We looked at a few accountability and evaluation models and let the teachers select what best met the needs of their particular students. Teachers chose from:

- Thematic IRP (Individual Reading Project): Students select fiction, based on an essential question. Students read in class on Fridays and respond in dialectical journals (a metacognitive tool), pulling quotes that address the question. At the end of the year, they synthesize their notes into an essay.

- Activities with Penny Kittle’s Book Love methods, including calculating reading rate and working toward improvement; a book conference with the teacher every three weeks; and a review or booktalk for the class.
- Open structure: Students get class time to read, and when they finish one book, they immediately return to the library for a new one. They create end-of-quarter written reviews or book talks

THE RESULT.

The semester we started, we saw a jump of only 200 circulations. But this year’s circulations demonstrate a nearly threefold increase, from the mid–500s in the first quarter of the past two years to 1,356 in the first quarter of this year. I’m struggling to keep up with the cycle of checkouts and the shelving of returns—a good problem to have!

One teacher’s students are averaging 386 independent reading pages for first quarter. “I am surprised at how much I have read in the last quarter and am proud of myself for the number of pages I read,” one of the teens wrote. “I was reading more outside of class than in class, which is very new to me....When I was bored at home I could just pick up my book and start reading.”

“This has definitely caused me to read loads more than I usually would,” wrote another. “I have been pushing myself to try and read books out of my comfort zone....I have swapped TV, social media, and sometimes homework for reading. I have noticed a difference with all my school work because I am already able to read a lot faster and understand everything.”

We hear authentic conversations about books before, during, and after class. Teachers report that students are making connections between what they are reading and real-life problems and situations. At conferences, parents say their kids now reading more than they have in years.

FIVE TIPS FOR SUCCESS

Nothing we are doing is new—all our methods have come from decades of research on reading and motivation. Our success comes from devotion to a few specific tenets:

- **Teacher and librarian enthusiasm:** Students respond to the care we give teaching them to find books. If educators aren’t enthusiastic, students won’t be either. Use a growth mindset: “I don’t like to read” means “You haven’t found the right book yet.” When students read, the teacher reads too.
- **Freedom to choose:** Students select books that they want to read, not ones based on reading level or any other constraint.
- **Up front instruction:** Show students *how* to find books of interest. They don’t intuitively.
- **Time to search and browse, and time to read:** It can be a challenge to carve out classroom reading time, but it pays off in spades.
- **Evaluation and evolution:** Continually evaluate the process and be willing to adapt as needed.

When we launched this initiative, we asked ourselves whether the rapid pace and distracted nature of modern life meant we needed to adjust our expectations. Researchers such as Newport and Nicholas Carr, author of *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (W.W. Norton, 2011), suggest that distraction is actively changing our brains and our habits. Since students are reading frequently—

but in smaller bursts, such as text messages, tweets, and condensed articles with hyperlinked content—we wondered if focused long-form reading was still an attainable aim.

The answer is a resounding yes.

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<http://www.slj.com/2017/12/teens-ya/doubled-library-circulation/#>