

Spring 2014

# Exercising Profound Patience in Student Discovery of the Power of Literacy

Peter R. Thacker

*University of Portland*, [thacker@up.edu](mailto:thacker@up.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://pilotscholars.up.edu/edu\\_facpubs](http://pilotscholars.up.edu/edu_facpubs)



Part of the [Secondary Education and Teaching Commons](#)

---

## Citation: Pilot Scholars Version (Modified MLA Style)

Thacker, Peter R., "Exercising Profound Patience in Student Discovery of the Power of Literacy" (2014). *Education Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 12.

[http://pilotscholars.up.edu/edu\\_facpubs/12](http://pilotscholars.up.edu/edu_facpubs/12)

This Journal Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Education at Pilot Scholars. It has been accepted for inclusion in Education Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of Pilot Scholars. For more information, please contact [library@up.edu](mailto:library@up.edu).

## WORKS CITED

- Akopoff, Tanya. A Case Study Examination of Best Practices of Professional Learning Communities. Diss. Walden University, 2010. Proquest, UMI, 2011. Print.
- Bandura, Albert. *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1986. Print.
- Bronson, Bertrand H., ed. *Samuel Johnson: Rasselas Poems and Selected Prose*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1958. Print
- Colwell, John, and Tina O'Connor. "Understanding Nurturing Practices: A Comparison of the Use of Strategies Likely to Enhance Self-esteem in Nurture Groups and Normal Classrooms." *British Journal of Special Education* 30.3 (2003): 119-24. Web.
- Fiore, Neil A. *The Now Habit: A Strategic Program for Overcoming Procrastination and Enjoying Guilt-free Play*. Rev. ed. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2007. Print.

Zimmerman, Barry J. "Self-regulated Learning and Academic Achievement: An Overview." *Educational Psychologist* 25.1 (1990): 3-17. Print.

■

*Joel Albritton teaches Honors and AP English courses at Sylmar High School Magnet in Los Angeles and is Co-founder and National Training Instructor, Rigorate Education.*

*Tanya Akopoff, Ph.D., Access to Core Instructional Coach at Sylmar High School, is Research Associate, Rigorate Education, a teacher professional development company. They can be reached at jalbritton@rigorate.com and takopoff@rigorate.com.*

■

---

# Exercising Profound Patience in Student Discovery of the Power of Literacy

Peter Thacker

---

Laura was an elderly friend. She had dropped out of high school and spent much of her life as a waitress. She sometimes read but was hungry for substance. In her seventies, she went back to get her GED. At the ripe age of 81, she announced that she was reading Thoreau's *Walden*.



We all have a contemplative part of ourselves, a voice inside that wants to understand the world and our place in it. Teachers must have, and encourage, profound patience, patience born of an understanding that we are not the arbiters of knowledge. We are simply individuals who love sharing our love of learning with others. Forget the reluctance

and wait for the blooming. It comes, especially when we listen and engage with our struggling students

In the world of educators, there is a myth that if students are not at grade-level by third grade, they are destined for failure. I have spent my life working with reluctant readers, most of them in high school, and what I have learned is that we teachers need to recognize the potential, resilience, and ability of all human beings to move beyond circumstance and build skills that give them pleasure, despite unpleasant earlier educative moments. Many times, we work one-on-one with strugglers to help build their self-confidence and create a literacy experience through personal connection. Sometimes, we build literate environments within our classrooms that

entice non-readers to join us. The following anecdotes draw from successful moments in my career, ones that have reinforced my deeply-held belief that all humans crave knowledge and the skills to access that knowledge for themselves.

#### Tara

When I was a young teacher, Tara was a friend, 30 years old and a non-reader. Her husband asked me to work with her. I answered, "Of course." I was surprised to hear Tara read. I had been warned early in my career that when teaching students to articulate sounds to be sure that they didn't add an "uh" to the end of the letter, "buh," "duh," "kuh..." Of course, I never imagined that that information would be useful because I seldom taught letter sounds. "Buht," boy, was I wrong not to acknowledge this advice. When Tara started reading for me, I immediately heard why she was not able to blend her words. All those "uhs" got in the way of reading meaningfully. It was a quick fix: "Say the sound, don't add 'uh.' Remember that you will know these words. What word makes sense there?" At the same time, we would each read a paragraph, allowing my modeling to quietly shape fluency. We probably worked together six or seven times, and Tara went off reading on her own.

Think of a grown woman scared to death of reading, believing she had no access to this skill, beginning to

read independently after a few sessions. She reads to this day all kinds of novels, magazines, and other materials. To become a reader, Tara needed a belief in her ability to learn, one-on-one attention focused on her strengths, and someone who could discern and explain her difficulty without critique.

#### David

David first came to my Cleveland High School reading program as a sophomore. He trucked from book to book, reading maybe 25, 50, once in a while even 75 pages before giving up and moving on to the next one. By the end of the year, he finally found one book that held him to the end: Walt Morey's *Run Far, Run Fast*, a story of a boy who hops trains to run away and ends up helping an elderly man who ends up as a mentor.

David left our program for a year, still unconvinced that reading was for him. However, he returned in his senior year and was placed with a college tutor who had led a workingman's life. The two immediately bonded. That year, David read many books, but the one that started him on his reading path was *Incident at Hawk's Hill*, a piece of historical fiction based on a young, disturbed boy (we would probably now categorize him as autistic) who befriended a badger in the 1800s. I later read it because David had so loved it. David's passion fueled mine. What inside David brought him to this book? Who knew this

## The OEJ Wants You!

We invite our readers to submit manuscripts  
for the Fall 2014 issue.

We are interested in submissions of varied forms, including essays, classroom accounts, debates, interviews, position papers, research reports, reviews, humor, and original poetry and fiction.

**Submissions must be received no later than September 1, 2014.**

*Please see the submission guidelines within this issue or on our website, [octe.org](http://octe.org).*

book would capture him? I certainly did not, and it took some serious patience to wait and watch him build his love for literature. David needed to be given the space to falter, pull away from a skill he did not yet perceive as useful, and slowly choose his own interests in reading.

### Jeremy

Jeremy was a middle school non-reader, a boy who would trip on “the,” “of,” “with” as well as “heart,” “position,” or “knowing” while reading. Word identification was random and, though he might correctly say a quarter of the words he was reading, there seemed to be no pattern as to why. He did not consistently identify one sight word. Jeremy also had an anger management problem and was stuck all day, every day in a variety of special education classes. He scored at first-grade level on his battery of reading tests. A friend asked me to tutor him. The first day, we sat around a bike shop (Jeremy could race, fast!) getting to know each other:

Jeremy: Don't want to read; don't like books.

Me: You ever seen *Holes*?

Jeremy: (A dissertation on the movie.)

Me: You want to read it together.

Jeremy: Yeah, sure.

Jeremy and I spent an evening a week reading together for close to two years. We graduated from reading every other line to reading every other page to Jeremy, after laughing through the adventures of our ADD hero in *Joey Pigza Swallows the Keys*, reading *Joey Pigza Loses Control* independently on the bus. You see, Jeremy and Joey Pigza shared some of the same issues. Jeremy loved when Joey, raising his hand and being called on, swiftly stated, “I’ll get back to you on that.” It seemed Jeremy had used this strategy a few times himself. Tested reading scores put Jeremy at the seventh grade within six months of our beginning to work together. He now saw patterns on the page. He read for meaning. Jeremy always had to navigate his dyslexia, but he found the patience to do so when confronted with books that spoke to him. Engagement with a person ready to accept him where he was didn’t hurt, either.

### *Catcher in the Rye*

While my preference has always been to give students the time and space to discover their literary loves, I

also have found that there are books that work for just about everyone, books like *Maniac Magee*, *The Outsiders*, and *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. At the top of this list, though, is *Catcher in the Rye*. What is it about this book? In my first year at Grant High School, I taught the English class bridging struggling students from the scripted reading program they had been required to take before enrolling in the mainstream English curriculum. Students were reading books of choice. Early on, Karen finished *Catcher*, sat up, and shouted, “Holden is me!”

A few years later, I was teaching at Lincoln High’s Summer School. Based on their objections to the book, two students’ parents requested that they read *A Separate Peace* rather than the oft-banned *Catcher*. We were reading *Catcher* aloud in class, and one of the students banned from the book snuck into the outside circle regularly to hear at least some of the story. When we finished the story, another student, Tamara, blurted out, “When was this book written?”

“Check it out.”

“1951, it couldn’t be 1951. This is now.”

At Cleveland High School, more than a decade later, a girl blurted out: “Mr. Thacker, I hate that book.” To myself, I muttered, “Thanks a lot, Olivia. Now how will I get everyone to read it?” The book worked, it always does, perhaps because readers react so passionately, positively and negatively, and I got my students to do one of my favorite-ever assignments: Write a story using Holden’s language. The day of finishing the essay exam, Olivia quietly caught me on her way out the door: “I still hate Holden, but I know him so much better.” Closely examining a character (or incident or experience or conflict or...) often leads us to deeper insight into ourselves and the world. When students learn that kind of discernment, they begin to grow as critical thinkers who ask questions of themselves and the world.

### *A Lesson before Dying*

There are also times we decide to entice students into a book we know might not be immediately gripping to students. This, too, can be a door to deepening literacy. It was one of those English classes that brought everybody together: tired honors kids, the everyday kids, those learning disabled kids struggling through each and every book. We were about to read *A Lesson before Dying*.

It features a disagreeable protagonist, a teacher who does not like his job or his students. He is in his head much of the time, definitely a harbinger of potential student disengagement, but the plot is compelling. A slow, young, black man, caught up in a Southern white men's capital crime, has been called "no better than a hog" by his lawyer. His community demands that the unwilling educator teach the death row inmate self-worth. We began our study of the novel with a literary tea party, during which students became various characters in an

There is more  
to our appetite  
for learning than  
we will ever  
know.

introductory role play then developed predictions about the arc of the novel.

Students were stoked and began reading with fervor. Because I knew students wanted to talk about issues in the book, I expected that, to participate

in discussions, each student needed to have read the assigned chapters. We used a back area of the classroom for students reading silently when they were behind. There was no shaming, no point loss, for choosing to keep reading. Students who needed to catch up un-self-consciously headed back to the reading area, joining the discussion when ready. Every student made it at least three-quarters of the way through the book, and all found themselves able to join our discussions more than once.

Sometimes we can inspire students practicing profound patience. Tapping into a student's internal reading voice does not always happen one-on-one, nor necessarily mentor to student. The love of reading can blossom in classes in which the atmosphere is such that the learning is shared, that reluctance paired with interest catalyzes into a most meaningful experience. Even teacher-chosen, mandated experiences can transform reluctant students into thoughtful participants in meaningful dialogue. There are many entry points into the world of literacy.

### Lessons Learned

Jefferson High School juniors, at the beginning of the year, were interviewing each other about their experience of reading, then reporting the results back to the class. There was a clear bifurcation: Girls said they liked to read; boys said they didn't. There were no big surprises, until the question of the importance of reading came up. Every single young man said he felt reading was impor-

tant. Here, then, is the dilemma. How do we give kids the keys to literacy? And I don't mean the mechanics. There are only a handful of kids who "can't read." What we need is the belief in children, the belief in the power of books to engage, the knowledge that all children want to learn, maybe not what we want them to learn, but to learn that which engages them. That is the task. And, sometimes that takes profound patience as well as un-failing belief in the students with whom we work. Hear them; they need listeners and highly attuned guides.

During a workshop I was giving with Americorps volunteers, I was sitting around a seminar table at Portland State University, getting to know the participants. One woman said she was working with the "I Have a Dream" foundation. I have had several "Dreamers" in my reading program over the years at Cleveland High School. One of the great aspects of this foundation is that they hire mentors who check in with teachers, visit classes; and are truly in kids' lives throughout their schooling. I had been troubled for several years by the loss of two Dreamers in their freshman year; they both dropped out, dropped back in, but finally did not return. Just out of a sense of possibility, I asked this woman if she knew these kids. Not only did she know them, she was still actively following them, five years later. One was still struggling, but the other was back in school making a real attempt to graduate. What tenacity was shown by those working with "I Have a Dream!" The foundation never gave up on its charges. The Dreamers knew that there were adults who really believed in them and would be there to help them when they were ready to make positive change.

When I speak of profound patience, I use the Dream model as my guide. Never give up on human beings. We may be reluctant, but we also aspire to learn, to know, to feel self-efficacy. There is more to our appetite for learning than we will ever know.

■  
*Peter Thacker has spent over forty years teaching reluctant (and sometimes avid) readers and teachers of them. He spent twenty-seven years of those years in Title I high schools in Portland and is in his eleventh year as a literacy and language arts professor in the School of Education at the University of Portland.*  
■