

The Power of Home Run Reading

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“*The Power of Reading* by Stephen Krashen is my home run reading book,” I excitedly told my professor in class. “What did you just say?” she gasped, as my colleagues stared at us and listened intently. I think we all sensed that something significant had just happened. “Yes! *The Power of Reading* is my home run reading book,” I repeated a bit more loudly this time. “Unbelievable. Forgive me if I do backflips right here. Now, go write about it,” the professor responded excitedly.

In what follows is the story about how one fine day, I discovered and internalized Stephen Krashen’s ideas about literacy and the power of reading. I finally *got it*. That day I finally made a connection to the coursework I had been struggling with, but more importantly, I found my passion. It was a true and very powerful text-to-life experience.

The purpose of this article is to explore the idea of the home run book’s impact on reading. We will examine how free voluntary reading (FVR), or pleasure reading, can affect reluctant and avid readers as well as social media readers, and finally the impact of reading for me personally.

The Impact of My Home Run Reading Book

The term *home run reading book* refers to that book that made us fall in love with reading. “[Jim] Trelease (2001) introduced the concept of a “home run” book, a reading experience that readers claim stimulated their initial interest in reading. The idea of a home run book comes from an observation made by Clifton Fadiman: “One’s first book, kiss, home run, is always the best”” (Ujii & Krashen,

2002, pp. 36-37). *The Box Car Children* was my home run reading book when I began to read as a child, but *The Power of Reading* is my home run book in my professional world. I have always been a voracious reader. I can remember being in second or third grade and going to the school library in our small town in North Dakota to check out *The Box Car Children* books by Gertrude Chandler Warner. How I loved reading those books. I once asked my mom how I learned to read. She told me she had no idea since we used to read little dime store picture books over and over so many times that she was convinced I was a genius because I could “read” the stories by myself. She followed up by adding that we had read them so much that I probably had just memorized them. However, make no doubt: I was reading.

Early on in my first semester of the English as a New Language (ENL) program, I struggled with the fact that I did not have any ENL students in my school or in my small town in northeastern Wyoming, where I am a high school English teacher who works with juniors and seniors.

As my first semester went on, I seriously considered withdrawing from classes. I just was not understanding what the professors wanted from us. I had no idea what I was going to do for a final project. I felt overwhelmed by all of it.

“Try this,” the professor said as she handed me her copy of *The Power of Reading* (2004) by Stephen Krashen, and then she left me alone. As I read, I began to understand how important reading was to the success of language learners as well as students in any setting. I began to make sense of how reading affects language learning; I began to understand how getting kids reading could help them acquire language! Later in those classes, we continued to talk about home run reading and its impact on learning. Dr. Wink’s stories about Krashen’s ideas lead me to a more serious exploration of literacy for students that might help them enjoy reading more.

The Impact of Reading

As a teacher, parent, student, and reader myself, I know the impact reading can have every day. We learn much of what goes on in the world by reading. I check my email first thing in the morning to see if I have any messages or texts waiting. I check the news every day on my computer. Before I go to bed at night I read whatever novel is on my bedside table. Being an avid reader, I struggle to understand why other people do not read. I struggle every day with ways to get my students to be readers. How do we help students find their home run reading book that will turn them into lifelong readers?

I think daily about the power of reading and its impact on learning. I talk about the impact of reading to family, students, and co-workers alike. We are not talking about assigned reading. We are talking about what Krashen describes as Free Voluntary Reading (FVR). No tests, no book reports, no evaluations, just reading for the love of reading.

The impact of reading goes far beyond a student's ability to read and understand the world better. Reading also increases a student's ability to communicate well. Reading helps students recognize proper sentence structure and grammar. Writing well, using diction appropriately helps students open their minds and experiment with their own creativity. As I have learned from reading Frank Smith and listening to Joan Wink, writing makes us smarter. Or, as Krashen tells us: "When we write, our mind automatically helps us solve problems, and in doing so, stimulates intellectual growth" (Krashen, 2005, p. 66). Reading fosters the ability to write well; it helps readers compose their thoughts and ideas to express them to others through writing.

The Impact on a Reluctant Reader

Years ago, the school district I worked for added a contemporary literature class to my teaching schedule. I had been asking to teach a class that students could join just for *the love of reading*. When the counselor started scheduling classes, one student, Lindsey, a straight-A student, came to see me about the literature class. She told me she didn't like to read, so was hoping my class would help her learn to appreciate reading. I was both excited and apprehensive about this new challenge.

The following fall when I started the class I decided that our first book would be Mitch Albom's *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* (2006). It was a great book to kick things off; it was easy to read with an interesting subject. A couple of days after we started I ran into Lindsey's mom at a school activity. The first thing she said to me was, "What did you do to my daughter?" I didn't even know how to respond, so she continued. "We were watching TV but Lindsey wasn't in the room. When I went to check on her, she was sitting in a chair in her room reading her book! I couldn't believe it."

The next day Lindsey came into class excited about what she had read, and she was eager to talk about it. The rest of that semester she continued to ask me for book recommendations, which she immediately read and came to discuss with me and the class. Nicholas Sparks turned out to be a favorite of hers. Lindsey had always been a good student, but she seemed to be even more involved and interactive once she realized that reading was something that could be done for pleasure.

The Impact of Reading for Pleasure

Reading for pleasure is essential according to Krashen (2004). Students who read because they enjoy it gain essential grammar and usage skills by osmosis. Much like students acquiring a new language, if the stories they are reading are “interesting and compelling” as Krashen tells us, students will acquire what they need. That not only works for acquisition of a new language, but also for vocabulary, grammar, spelling, writing ability, and knowledge of the world.

My daughter Jamie recently attended conferences for her second-grade daughter. Aamira’s teacher told Jamie that Aamira was reading at a fourth-grade level so it was hard to find books for her that were at her level but still appropriate for her age. I asked Jamie if they read with her a lot, but Jamie told me that very often Aamira can be found sitting on her bed with a book. That love of reading seems to be something innate, something that she loves doing despite the fact that there is no big push to read from her parents. As a result, her vocabulary skills and her ideas about the world are much broader than what many expect from a 7-year-old. Not only is my granddaughter an avid reader, but so is my father. When I was growing up, I do not think I ever saw my dad pick up a book. We farmed and ranched in the Dakotas and there just did not seem to be enough time in the day to read for pleasure. Even after my dad returned to school and began working in farm credit, he did not read for pleasure, but since his retirement he has learned to take time for reading. He would come home from auction sales with boxes and boxes of old westerns. Last year I bought him a Kindle. It has become a full-time job for my mom to keep his Kindle loaded with books since he reads about a book a day. Recently I loaded a dictionary on his Kindle. He is amazed at the technology that allows him to place the cursor over a word only to have the definition pop up on the screen. Even at the age of 75, my dad is still learning new vocabulary, experiencing new adventures, and working hard to keep his mind sharp despite the effects of aging.

The Impact of Reading on Social Media

Also relevant today, when it comes to student reading, is the massive amount of online reading students participate in. Krashen has spoken often about Free Voluntary Surfing (FVS) to accompany FVR. Students are reading and writing posts through text messages, Facebook, Snapchat and a host of other social media apps. Although this is not academic communication, students are reading and writing more than at any other time in history. Literacy is happening voluntarily through the exchange of messages.

The Impact of Reading Academically

The problem with student reading is that more often than not, students who have not found their home run reading book have not discovered their own love of reading. As a result, students struggle to read academically because they have not acquired the reading skills developed through Free Voluntary Reading, which Krashen (2004) tells us is so important to academic success. Without these skills students are at risk of scoring lower on high stakes tests such as ACT and SATs. For ELL students, reading is a bridge to understanding more and more language in context. Reading books that they can comprehend but that challenge them just a little to stretch their understanding, goes a long way towards language acquisition.

The Impact of Reading and Stress

I was recently talking to my nieces about the importance of reading for pleasure. My 13-year-old niece said she does not like to read because it isn't interesting. That is the issue I see with some of my students, as well. The exception to this rule seems to be with students who have difficult home lives or have suffered some kind of trauma. My 15-year-old niece who has been affected by several difficult events over the past year entered the conversation with her own ideas about reading. "When I am reading," she said, "I am hearing about other people's problems so I don't have to think about what has happened in my life. I can read for hours to escape the thoughts in my head."

Studies done on the effect of reading and stress back up this idea of relief from the worries and problems of life. Reading provides a type of escapism from traumatic events, according to cognitive neuropsychologist Dr. David Lewis: "... by losing yourself in a thoroughly engrossing book you can escape from the worries and stresses of the everyday world... This is more than merely a distraction but an active engaging of the imagination as the words on the printed page stimulate your creativity and cause you to enter what is essentially an altered state of consciousness" (*The Telegraph*, 2009).

Students who come to this country from areas of conflict can not only acquire language through voluntary reading, but can also escape from their own thoughts brought on by post-traumatic stress. Reading for pleasure provides benefits that range far beyond just learning something new.

The Impact of Reading on Me Personally

Reading, especially the love of reading, has provided me with a world far beyond my physical boundaries. As an active duty Air Force member I have traveled to

Asia, living in the Philippines and visiting Korea and Japan; I was also stationed in Germany and traveled to several European countries. Since becoming an empty-nester, I have traveled often to Great Britain and Western Europe. Reading allows me to experience worlds beyond what is natural; science fiction and science fantasy are favorites. Because of my love of reading, I have also excelled academically, currently working towards my second master's degree. Even with all of this life experience I still love the experiences and adventures discovered through reading.

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