

TECHNOLOGY AND MOTIVATION: CAN COMPUTERS MOTIVATE STUDENTS TO READ?

NSBA Conference, San Francisco, CA (April 13, 2007) – Three thousand high school students drop out of school everyday and, according to Quality Quinn, noted education consultant and senior advisor to CompassLearning, a leading K-12 education software maker, motivation is at the heart of the issue.

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 reading and instruction and discusses the importance of motivation. In the piece, 15 key areas are identified for action and continued research.

According to Quinn, educators and researchers can overcome the challenges of 14 of the 15 elements identified, but “motivation,” or self-directed learning, is the most difficult and, perhaps, the most important.

“Without developing motivation, the other 14 elements lose context,” says Quinn. “The good news is that another of the elements, “technology,” holds the key to developing motivation.”

Motivation means having the desire and willingness to do something. Teachers who 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 should 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 tasks that continue to be interesting, meaningful and relevant at a level of difficulty that is challenging but within reach.
- **Interest:** Motivation is impacted by the learner’s level of interest in the activity. Novelty also initiates interest. A sense of wonder is crucial to the learning process because it fosters a desire for more information.
- **Level of Concern:** 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 and provide frequent assessments to sustain students’ motivation and provide a supportive and responsive classroom culture.
- **Success:** 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:** Rewards come in many forms but schools tend toward material rewards (pizza) or the reward of no punishment, i.e., If you do this, you won't have to stay after school, etc. Good instruction must provoke a learner toward an intrinsic reward system. Teachers who create environments that allow students to experience a sense of "I've got it" are promoting motivation.

"Teachers' shoulders are not broad enough to assess, design and apply supplemental reading and writing to every below-level reader at the appropriate level of difficulty," says Quinn.

"However, when you examine the fundamental strengths of information technology, specifically, software and its ability to store, respond, differentiate, aggregate and disaggregate in vivid, multi-modal 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 put it, 'The computer doesn't think I'm stupid!'"

So, the question is begged: What is the best use of technology as part of the "mix of intervention elements" (*Reading Next*, 2005) for adolescent readers? According to Quinn, reading software that leverages the most current advances in media design and cultural and kid-sensitive iconography, combined with rigorous research-based content, can create "flow," the feeling of complete and energized focus in an activity with a high level of enjoyment.

"Because of technology's fundamental ability to store thousands of compelling opportunities built around solid reading content, it keeps the learner in flow while increasing the learner's fluency, comprehension and language skill," says Quinn. "None of this replaces the importance of a highly-qualified teacher. But, when it comes to motivation, advances in reading technology to supplement or strategically intervene are undeniable if careful planning and preparation are in place."

About Quality Quinn

Quality Quinn is a senior advisor to CompassLearning, Inc., one of the nation's leading providers of K-12 education software, where she works with the company on software development and key education initiatives and provides professional development services. In addition, Quinn is a noted author, international literacy expert and consultant who has received numerous awards for her work with beginning reading and assessment systems. Quinn is also an advisor to the successful Texas Reading Initiative that has resulted in minority students attaining some of the highest gains in reading improvement in the country. In addition, through her own non-profit organization, Project EarlyWord, Quinn is leading a new bilingual initiative between Mexico and the United States. She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from York College of Pennsylvania and a Master of Arts with a concentration in Curriculum and Instruction from University of San Diego.

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