The Reading Connection

By Jordan Fabish

Attitude-Ability Symbiosis

“In our classrooms, we work tirelessly at establishing appropriate levels of interest, instruction, and learning-style, but I am convinced that our greatest challenge is motivating students of all ages toward the consistently courageous position of ‘Does this make sense?’ instead of ‘Whatever.’ . . . Attitude: the answer to life and to learning.” Who says so? Er, I do, or, I did, in the last newsletter. I believe we all do, carrying with us a strong sense of the interplay of ability and attitude, the one either smoothing or blocking the path to the other. We know that even our most properly sequenced, engaging, and proximal-developmental-zoned lessons do not stir an unreceptive mind.

Our Master’s studies mark attitude-ability symbiosis. To cite only two now-familiar researchers: Keith Stanovich observed the “negative spiral of cumulative disadvantage” (1993/94, p. 281) of a child who has trouble decoding, is too frustrated to enjoy reading and, thus, avoids it, never quite progressing to mastery. Deficient ability knocks down positive attitudes, weakened attitudes thwart ability, and the disadvantage accumulates, spiraling down like dominoes. Frank Smith, too, paired ability with attitude when he declared, “. . . [children] must join the literacy club.” Why must they? “We learn and behave like the people we see ourselves as being like. If we belong to a club, then everything pertaining to the club comes to us naturally, as of right. But if we are excluded from the club, or if we exclude ourselves, then we deliberately constrain ourselves from acting like members of the club. We learn not to be like members of the club” (1997, p. 113, 115). Attitude either empowers or undermines ability.

More currently, results from an international study of child literacy conducted by the assessment division of the International Study Center at Boston and reported in Reading Today, August/September 2003, found that “students with the most positive attitudes had the highest reading achievement” (p. 4). More broadly, biologist Athena Andreadis posits, “Humans have many weaknesses, but realizing a vision is a paramount strength of our species” (2003, p. 15). Ability-attitude symbiosis is documented, but also, I believe, instinctual; therefore, it is advisable to cultivate both as we teach . . . and we do! We not only know our subject areas, we encourage, nurture, joke, scold, and stretch. We demonstrate how to manage test anxiety, time, and stress. We teach goal-setting and personal responsibility; we practice tough love and the power of positive thinking. And we look for fresh approaches to teaching the attitudes that will empower ability. Here is one such approach designed by academic-athletic-motivational coach Andrew Stevens that you may wish to use in your own classrooms.

Stevens is a friend, but when he speaks to students in my classes, I monitor carefully his message and methods, scrutinizing how they correspond to the student-achievement goals I hope to facilitate. Simultaneously, I winnow the motivational kernels that especially seem to resonate with the students and that I know I can replicate. Here are two: one is a demeanor (an attitude, one could say); one is a strategy (one could even call it an ability). First of all, Andy recruits the students into the literacy club in about 15 minutes. How is this possible?! Yes, he is witty and quick and quirky and cool, and it doesn’t hurt that he looks like Brad Pitt, but how does that help you and me? What comes to mind is that he is living out Jewish existential philosopher Martin Buber’s “I-Thou” theory—he balances the necessary teacher-student distance with a very person-to-person “I-Thou” mien (Buber, 1958). He immediately learns their names, finds out and remembers their goals; he challenges and listens; he is respectful and commands respect. When I watch him, I know I cannot copy his hip style, but I can copy his determination to connect with those students; I can practice “I-Thou” even if they are expecting the
often-typical teacher-student enmity.

After the dialogue, the humor, the connections, the questions that raise more questions, and an exhilarating general unsettling, Andy tenders a gift we can carry away—a simple sketch, an echoing question. On the board, a picture takes shape.

“Ha! OK, what do you think this is?”
“A football field?” “A basketball court?”

“Sure! Some type of playing field. So, who’re the people inside the rectangle?”
“The players.”
“Right. What do they do?”

(There are always lots of answers, getting progressively more realistic and specific, because many students, themselves, play soccer, basketball, swim on a team, sing in a choir, etc. They know how hard the players “play” and prepare, how brave they must be through both the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat. They know about practicing and teamwork.)

“Absolutely! They’re out there sweating, panting, reaping the rewards of hard training, maybe making mistakes, making mistakes in front of everyone. And they’re taking direction from . . . who’s that on the sidelines?”

“The coach.”
“OK, good. They’re taking direction from the coach. We have lots of ‘coaches’ in our lives. Who are your coaches?”

“Our teachers.” “Mrs. Fabish.” “Our parents.”

“Do coaches make you do waaaay more than you would or could do on your own? Do they make you do hard things?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah. And who’re all those other people?”

“The fans. The audience.”

“And what do they do?


“RIGHT! Have they been training every day or twice a week or whatever? (“No.”) Are they out of breath? (“No.”) They’re sittin’ back . . . ‘Hey, whadderya doin’ out there?! ‘Oh, man, what an idiot!’ . . . eatin’ their hotdogs at their ‘whine ‘n’ cheese party.’ And which is easier: playing the game or watching the game?”

(Here, the answers vary as they really consider if the apparently easier couch-potato position is one they could sustain. Ultimately, most people’s value systems find worth in the role of participation and distain for the idle critic, realizing the disconnect between players and even their admiring fans.)
“Now, what if this little chalkboard game is your life? Maybe you don’t play sports or even like sports. Maybe I’m just a kookball drawing weird stuff on the board. But think about how you fit into this chalkboard game, and then ask yourself, in your education . . . on the path to your goals . . . in your relationships . . . are you on the court or in the stands?”

Are you on the court or in the stands?

With a bit more elaboration, the talk is done. He stays to answer questions or chat. An enjoyable hour is over and we all go about our business. Were lives changed? I will never know to what degree, but I do know that at any time during the rest of the semester, I can query, “Are you on the court or in the stands?” and we recall the feelings of that hour and re-make the decision to get back on the court. Only on the court (and with all the attitudes that the court embodies—willingness to learn, cooperation, courage, decisiveness, responsibility, perseverance) can we “coaches” perfect or even address the players’ varied span of abilities.

As teachers of reading, there are so many abilities—so many skills and sounds and ways of thinking we want to bring to our students, it is understandable that we may be disinclined to spend much time dabbling in the affective domain. Yet, if ability and attitude are synergistic, all our efforts to improve ability will surely relate to our effectiveness in improving attitude. When students perceive themselves (attitude!) as members of the literacy club, they will perceive that skill, that sound, that way of thinking as being for them; if not, those things will have no relevance to them. We can intervene in the negative spiral of cumulative disadvantage via both ability and attitude.

In order to do all this, it could be that we are the ones who need an “attitude adjustment.” During those times of disappointment and discouragement that can lead to cynicism, perhaps, we need to surround ourselves with a more positive team (metaphorically or actually), or get a personal trainer, or alter our schedule so that time for physical and emotional refreshment is part of it.

See you on the court!

Andrew Stevens may be contacted at ajstevens@wwdb.org

My email address is jfabish@lbcc.edu

Ed. Note: The following essay addresses reading and language difficulties in students, which are often misunderstood. Specific Language Disability is also referred to as Specific Language Difference and, in a broader context, Dyslexia.

Specific Language Disability

Jan Court-Keller
The Prentice School
Students who do not find success in conventional classrooms, despite an average to above average intelligence and adequate classroom instruction, are often deemed lazy, slow, uncooperative, or oppositional. They are, too often, left on their own at the back of the classroom. Or, they are grouped with special education children and do not receive a level of education commensurate with their abilities. These children have Specific Learning Disability (SLD), more commonly referred to as Dyslexia. SLD is familial in nature. It is neurologically based, and impedes language acquisition and processing, specifically as it relates to reading, writing, and oral communication. Though there is a difference in the manner in which the brain functions, SLD is not the result of brain damage, or mental or emotional disturbances.

SLD students are characterized by traits, which relate to deficiencies in language alone. They have average to above average intelligence. Yet, they typically are poor readers. They have poor decoding skills, read orally hesitantly, insert or omit small words, and read silently well below grade level. Speech may be hesitant or disorganized, with word recall difficult. They may find it hard to get to the point. Most are poor spellers. Some experience difficulty with sequencing; numbers, events, stories, time. They are likely to skip steps in multiple function activities. In the home or at school, many are easily distracted by noise and activities that are not distractions to other students or children. There may be a general lack of organization. Most importantly, no two SLD children are alike. The continuum of severity of the disability ranges from mild to severe. SLD students, with proper teaching and guidance, can learn. Beth Slingerland worked with SLD children in the early part of the 20th century. Working with Bessie Stillman and Anna Gillingham, she developed the Slingerland approach to working with SLD children. Her teaching differs from the conventional Orton-Gillingham tutorial approach in that it has been adapted for whole classroom use. The method is directed through reading and oral language development, and generalizes through the entire curriculum. Instruction is not specific to children; it is structured to enhance reading, and language development of adults as well.

The basis of the Slingerland approach is that it is multi-sensory and involves the simultaneous integration of the auditory, visual and kinesthetic (AVK) channels in the individual. The students use sight, sound and feel together while instruction takes place that enhances oral language development. Instruction begins with the smallest units of sound through phonemic awareness; even for the middle school students. Working sequentially, through the intellect, instruction continues integrating the smallest units of sight and sound (phonics) to begin to spell; adding affixes, recognizing phrases, sentences, with the ultimate goal of independence in reading and writing, and putting it all to functional use. The usual lists and weekly spelling tests are suspended; spelling is practiced through a daily format of blending sounds to form words within a paragraph dictation, with each step moving from the simple to complex. Reading is structured to increase fluency, and comprehension.

Placing SLD students within the special education environment is restrictive. Yet often that is where these students find themselves. They are not learning in the traditional classroom. Each year they fall further and further behind the other students despite their teacher’s best efforts. They are, as a result, placed among students who may have mild to severe physical disabilities, low I.Q., or emotional disturbances. SLD students have the intellectual capacity to learn, they have the physical and mental ability to succeed, given the education environment suited to their learning style and needs.

Additional information may be found at these websites:

The Slingerland Institute for Literacy
Bellevue, WA
www.slingerland.org

The Prentice School
Santa Ana, CA
This fall, hosting the 54th Annual Conference of The International Dyslexia Association
November 12-15, 2003
Town & Country Resort and Convention Center
San Diego, CA

---

Reading Educators Guild Newsletter Staff

Editor: Jan Court-Keller

Faculty Footnotes: Kathi Bartle Angus

The Reading Connection: Jordan Fabish

If you would like to contribute to the newsletter, by being a regular column writer or just an occasional article donator, please contact Jan Court-Keller at kellermrs@hotmail.com. We need all of you to help make REG great!