

Student Centered Individualized Learning

Marsha Forest and Jack Pearpoint

S = Student Centered, Second Chance

S = Student Centered, Second Chance. This equation is such a simple concept and yet so difficult for so many to grasp. The student must be the subject of his or her own learning. Especially for adults who have not learned by traditional methods, the student's own life, fears, and successes can serve as the richest curriculum. Find the student and you have it half made. Impose a store-bought curriculum and you have another dropout. Ask your student:

What do you want to learn?
How can I help you?
Why are you here?
What do you think stopped you
from learning the first time around?

All these questions focus on the student — on his or her life, wants, fears, etc. Contrast that approach with this one:

Turn to page 1 and we'll learn the letter "K". "K" is for "kite."

"S" can also stand for "second chance" for those who did not make it the first time around. "Second chance" means to these people: You did not fail. Somehow you fell through the cracks, and the system failed you. We want to make it work this time and give you a second chance. Will you go half way with me? We can do it!

C = Centre, Control

"C" stands for centered. The student is at the center first and foremost, not the

teacher, the system, overheads, books, worksheets, or slides. In a student-centered learning situation, the tutor asks, "Who are you? What makes you tick? Why did you come here? What are your hopes, dreams, fears? I am here to serve you and I will tell you who I am, too. I am here because I want to be."

If the student is truly at the heart of the curriculum, I guarantee he or she will learn and will learn fast. I have been amazed at the speed in which so-called totally illiterate adults have learned to read when trust is established and lessons are tailored to the person who has come to learn.

"C" also stands for control. Giving people power and control over their own lives is central to the philosophy of Student Centred, Second Chance (SCIL). The control must go to the student, not to the program or the teacher. The student should eventually control the content, pacing, and other aspects of all the lessons. It is the student's own life in question. The student must choose to take the steering wheel in his or her hands.

I = Individualized

"So where are my workbooks? Where are the sheets I have to fill out?"

"Sorry, student. This time you are the program. We will make the instructions just for you. No microwave education here. No instant pudding curriculum. As we get to know one another we will design the program together. Sure we will use magazines and newspapers, workbooks and cookbooks when necessary but this is tailor-made education." "Yeah, so what's the payoff? What do

I have to do?"

"Teach someone else some day. When you are ready and if you want to, you will have your own student and put him or her through the same process."

We at Frontier College believe that if you individualize the curriculum at the beginning, eventually your student will choose to go back to school when he or she is ready to take on a less personalized approach.

Our major strength lies in taking the "turned off" and turning them back on to learning and, most of all, to believing that they can learn.

L = Learning

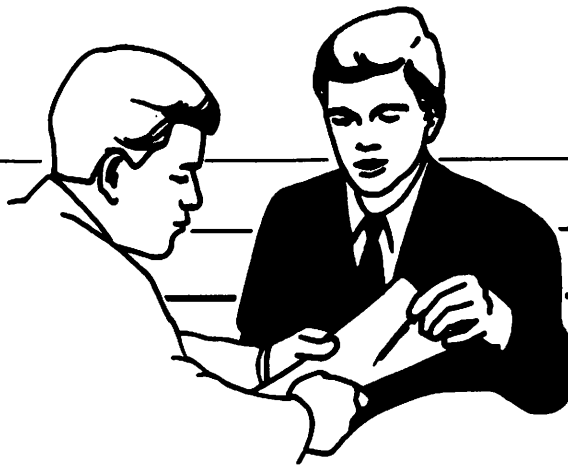
"L" is for learning. What is learning? Why is it that experts seem to know so much and students do not? I believe this problem stems from the old medical model in which the patient never knew what was wrong till he or she was dead!

It is important for students to understand the process of learning and, most important, to quickly unlock the mystery of what reading and writing is all about.

It is a cruel hoax that most poor readers think reading is a process of sounding out letters. Ask a group of poor readers what reading and writing is. You will get answers like this:

"A bore."
"Horrible."
"Something you have to do."
"Sounding."
"Letters."

Ask a group of good readers the same question, and they will say things like: "Magic."



"Wonderful."
"Relaxing."
"Meaning in life."
"Expanding."
"Fun."

Tell a group of poor readers that anyone who can talk should be able to and generally can read and write very well. Tell them that grammar, spelling and sounds are not the key. Tell them that reading is getting meaning from print and that for the first month they do not have to worry about spelling, grammar, sound, and letters. Watch the relief. See the smiles. Explain that even good writers edit themselves or have editors who check spelling, punctuation and grammar after the initial writing is done. Tell them that most executives have secretaries, use dictaphones, or use computers that have spell check programs. Watch the relief and see the anger. Several of my students have gotten very angry that no one told them these things before. Turn that anger into writing! Get the student to write about these feelings of anger and frustration. Use the anger for lessons about why the student did not learn. And, for God's sake, do not correct the writing. Save it and edit it later.

The start of any relationship has the seeds in it of what is to follow. A good start is the most important thing you can do for a student who sees himself or herself as a failure of the system. One student reported that walking in the door for his first lesson was the second most frightening experience in his whole life. Asking for help at any age is a challenge, but if you are 25 or older it is even harder,

and if you are over 50 it is a really tough thing to do.

If I can tell anyone anything in this article, it is the next few lines. It is the job of a good tutor/teacher to make the person feel confident that he or she can learn. Encouragement, faith, and enthusiasm of the tutor in the beginning stages are also the key. If the tutor has any doubts about the student, if he does not like the student for any number of reasons, I guarantee failure. If the teacher has unwavering confidence combined with good common sense skills, the prognosis for success is excellent.

Beginning Tactics for Literacy Tutors

First things to do for you as a reading tutor are to relax, have coffee together, talk, EXCHANGE stories and then:

1. Find out everything you can about your student. How? By asking. Slowly. Do not push. Create an autobiography. There is no better place to begin than with the person him/herself. Their lives, wishes, dreams, fears, hopes, etc. not just age, weight, height – but how they feel, what their passions are. Create a history with the person. Their past, present and future. Also share who you are. Never ask what you yourself are unprepared to answer.
2. Be a good observer. Keep your eyes open. Watch. Use your eyes as well as your ears to see as well as to hear what the student is telling you. Learn about your students by observing their lives. How do they interact with you, with others. Keep a record of your observations for planning your

curriculum. A successful curriculum will begin WITH not FOR the student.

3. You are teaching people to read and write. You therefore must do the same. READ. WRITE. Read aloud to the student each session. Have him/her dictate a story to you. Record the story. Read it back. Voila! There it is, the student has a story in print. Save these stories. When the student can read, let him/her read his/her own stories aloud to you, to others.
4. If you have a paper and pencil you are ready to begin. Sure expensive books and materials are good, but if you can not get them, just start. Go to the library. Make friends with the local librarian. For adults, use adult materials. It is insulting and degrading to teach adults with material made for children. Some great starters include: a telephone book, the yellow pages, local newspapers, advertisements, television guides, catalogues, menus, posters, buttons, signs, etc.
5. Use music. Play records. Read lyrics.
6. Give the student an assignment he/she can succeed at. Something interesting, non-print oriented and relevant – example: Have people verbally interview their own family members.

All this is an ASSESSMENT TECHNIQUE. You are trying to determine:

Who is the student?

What are the student's strengths?

What are the student's needs? Be very specific — Not just "learning to

read." Does the student want to read letters, material at work, a newspaper, grocery products, songs, etc?

Goals: Based on the needs, set goals and target dates with your student. Review this often and modify it as needed.

Tutor Magic - The Power of Positive Thinking

We have observed volunteer tutors at work and are convinced that the thing we do best is to allow people to see their strengths and become confident that they can learn. We replace DIS-ability and IL-literacy (diseases) with self confidence and meaningful skills.

For example, Thomas, 25 years old, was one of the millions who slipped through the system. He could not read and write a word. He was convinced he was stupid as he was a graduate of the special education system. He was labelled slow, learning disabled, dyslexic, etc. He believed every word. Enter SCIL. A volunteer tutor met Thomas. The two got to know one another. The tutor asked what Thomas wanted - what his dreams were. Three key areas emerged.

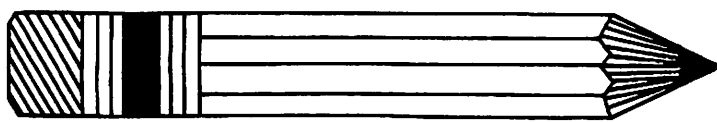
1. An avid interest in woodworking
2. A desire to be a mechanic
3. A love for his 5-year-old twin nieces.

There is the curriculum. Enough for any good tutor to work on for months.

Using Thomas's interests, an individualized program is created. Thomas learned quickly as the material was totally relevant to his life. He learned to write about cars, and how to fix them. He joined the library and took out books on woodworking and cars. He and his tutor practiced filling out job applications and role played for interviews. Within six months, Thomas was reading and writing, and got a job doing house renovations at \$11.00 per hour. He also convinced his mother to get a tutor.

Another example. Daryl is an excellent tutor. His student, Anna, decided she wanted to be a model. A friend of Daryl's laughed, "Anna, a model? You've got to be kidding! Let's be realistic. What's she going to model? No way!"

Daryl listened to Anna and phoned a friend whose daughter is a professional model. He got the name of some agencies. Part of their next lessons involved researching for information, writing the job applications, etc. Will Anna be a



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model? Maybe yes, maybe no. Can she get a related job in the area? Maybe. But Daryl followed Anna's lead and it is taking them in the right direction.

Another student, Lance, decided he wanted to attend his tutor's university classes - and go to a university. Lance, labelled mentally handicapped, had never even finished elementary school, let alone high school. Did Gloria, his tutor tell him to "be realistic," or did she trust Lance enough to invite him to her course "as a guest" to see if he enjoyed it. Lance (on his own) decided it was "too much reading and writing" and that he would visit once in a while. He did however like the university and now works as a courier from the central office.

Summary of Key Elements in a Good Learning Situation:

- The tutor and students are active participants.
- There are more chances for success than failure.
- There is an abundance of student/tutor-made materials.
- All materials used are relevant to the learners.
- Learning is interdisciplinary, i.e., math is related to art, and reading is part of everything. Learning is not chopped up but is interrelated.
- The tutor is consistent.
- The tutor is flexible.
- The tutor refuses to let the students give up.
- The tutor has a rich fund of knowledge, information, and resources.

-The tutor believes that all people can learn, want to learn, and have the capacity to learn.

In short, anyone reading this article who has an interest in tutoring someone having trouble reading and writing can do it. There is no mystery or magic involved. Years of experience around the globe have shown that ordinary citizens involved in literacy programs can work small miracles on a daily basis.

Call any literacy program in your community and ask if you can help. Send a donation - because literacy programs across the country lack stable funding.

You can volunteer to help in a wide variety of programs and places - including schools, community based programs, institutions like hospitals and prisons, workplaces - but most important with your family and friends.

You do not have to have a degree in English to read to a child - and demonstrate to them the magic of books. You can change the future for a child with 15 minutes a day. It is not much to ask. And the rewards are mutual.

Here is a List of Things You Can Do

- **Become a Tutor:** Anyone who can read and write who has the desire to help another person, and who has the time to take some training, can be an effective tutor. Research on "peer tutoring" shows that both the "tutor" and the "student" learn and win.

- **Talk to Your Employer:** Wherever you work, some of your colleagues have

a hidden literacy problem. Raise the issue! Over coffee, on the safety committee, with your shop steward, at lunch, talk about this article. Better yet, post this on your bulletin board.

• **Read to Your Children:** Overwhelming research shows that children who are surrounded by books, magazines and newspapers, and who are read to by adults, become good readers. If you want your child to be a good reader, and enjoy worlds of adventure, history, romance and travel through print, here are a few hints:

- read to them - 15 minutes a day;
- Read with them;
- Read out loud; read silently; read together;
- Discuss what you read with you child;
- Read alone in front of them.

In short, set a good example. Do not forget, you are a very important role model for your child. If you read and enjoy reading, chances are they will copy you.

• **Give a Friend a Book:** Give a book or a magazine or newspaper subscription, or pens and paper. Visit a used book store. Always inscribe books you give ... it makes it extra special. And if you have good books and magazines around, help someone start a library. Not everyone can afford it on their own.

• **Join the Library:** If you are a member, survey your friends. Are they? Recruit them. Take home a book, a record or computer disk.

• **Write a Letter to the Editor:** Literacy is an important issue - write about it - or any other topic you choose!

• **Read and Write for Someone Who Cannot:** The isolation a person feels being cut off from friends and family - and unable to read their letters - or write - is unnecessary frustration. Whether the cause be a stroke, an accident, or lack of opportunity makes no difference. There are people in your community who need your partnership. An unsighted student needs readers; a person with hearing difficulties or cerebral palsy could use a good scribe; a person in a hospital, institution or prison needs your partnership.

• **Write a Letter Today:** Answer last year's unanswered holiday cards. If you want your children to write, set a good example. Have a family writing hour. Write each other notes and songs and poems. Keep a journal. Keep a book of favourite jokes or recipes. Send them to a friend. We all like to receive mail. And remember, there are thousands of people in nursing homes, prisons, and other institutions to whom a letter is a treasure. You can give someone a wealth of pleasure ... write.

• **Write Your Premier and your Prime Minister:** Our elected representatives need to know what we consider important. Tell them. Write. Ask questions. Together we can solve almost any problem.

• **Become a Pen Pal:** You can be a friend to almost anyone - almost anywhere - with a pen and some paper. Explore the world ... make a new friend.

• **Talk to Your Church, Synagogue, Mosque or Temple:** Your religious congregation could be an important source of support for literacy - volunteers, space,

awareness, funds and promotional activities. It is an existing network that could be mobilized to support existing or create new programs.

• **Make a Generous Donation:** In addition to time and talent, literacy programs everywhere need cash. You can help.

Literacy Is a Community Issue:

Literacy is not merely a matter of schooling. It is fundamental to our way of life. Thus the responsibility and opportunity to resolve the critical problem of illiteracy rests with us. We can do it. We have the skills and the talents. We are the resources. We can make Canada a nation of readers. There are no adequate excuses.

The last word must go to a student who not only learned to read and write, but has since created a remarkable new literacy program for urban street people. This was the first poem Tracy LeQuerey wrote.

DON'T PASS ME BY

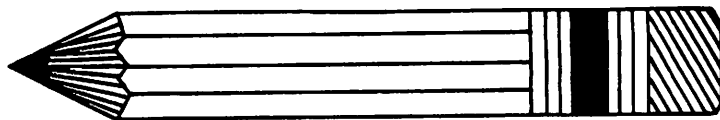
*I'm just a man at thirty-three
Who just learned to read,
I was here all the time
But people just passed me by.*

*One day a woman said I will
show you a lie.
I know you can read with
a little time.
I won't pass you by.*

*So she gave me a little time,
and I gave her a little time.
See this writing,
I will have more in time.*

Don't pass me by!

Marsha Forest, Ed.D. is the co-director of the Centre for Integrated Education in Toronto. The center is dedicated to the inclusion of disabled students in the regular classroom. Jack Pearpoint is the president of Frontier College in Toronto. This institution educates adults. Pearpoint is travelling in Asia during 1990 with his exhibit, "Frontiers of Literacy, A Canadian Tradition."



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thing you can do for a student
who sees himself or herself as a
failure of the system.*