

Relevant Reading: The Importance of Connection for Sustaining Readers

By Louise Baigelman, Story Shares

If you're an avid reader, here is something that you implicitly understand: we choose to read things we care about. If you are fascinated by World War I, you may eagerly consume nonfiction texts that illuminate that period and all the facts and anecdotes that bring that period to life. If you love a good mystery, you may enjoy nothing more than some free time in your day when you can escape into a suspenseful novel. If you are interested in current events, you may read the newspaper religiously every morning, staying up-to-date on all the latest happenings. Regardless of the type of content that draws you in, you are reading in these cases because you want to. Because the content you are reading is relevant to you: thought-provoking, attention-grabbing, enjoyable in some way.

When this is the context for reading, the reading of each individual word itself is just a vehicle—a path to new information, new narratives. You are not thinking about the skill. You are not focused on the act of identifying and stringing together the individual letters, words, or sentences. You are using your ability to automatically decode in order to access the content, to make meaning from the text. Meanwhile, you are using this same underlying skill throughout your day in all sorts of other ways: to keep up with your email, to understand the instructions on your new gadget, to pay your bills, to read your children a bedtime story. Reading is a foundational skill for many of the pieces of your daily life.

So, if you look at this skill from the other angle, you may start to notice the multifold challenge it presents for those who struggle with reading, and in particular, those who struggle with reading beyond elementary school. At this point, both of these truths about reading are missing: you can't read about the things you care about, and you can't read to access information that's important for day-to-day living. Teenagers and adults who lack key literacy skills may have never gotten to have the experience of reading for pleasure: of diving into someone else's story, of seeking new books and articles to understand more about an intriguing topic. At a certain point, probably in late elementary school, they ran up against a critical barrier: their interests no longer aligned with their reading

abilities.

Think about a concrete example of a student like this: a 16-year-old girl, who just immigrated to the United States from Haiti. When she enters high school in her new town, her reading skills in English are around a third grade level, at least seven years behind her age. She is not able to read the books, or articles, written for 16-year-olds. But the content written at her reading level is intended for eight-year-olds. So, she certainly does not want to read that content either. What does she read? If there is nothing for her to read—options that she *can* read, and also *wants* to read—she won't spend time reading. And so instead of getting the practice she so desperately needs to become a proficient reader, she falls further and further behind.

This example does not represent a niche situation. In the U.S. alone, as many as 90 million teens and adults lack key literacy skills. Seventy percent of high school students in this country need some form of reading remediation. Globally, the number of students that need some form of reading remediation is *774 million*. There are hundreds of millions of teens and adults who don't have the literacy skills they need to access information, or to read for pleasure.

This literacy crisis requires a focus on improving the reading skills of older struggling readers: those who are past the point where there is an emphasis on reading instruction, but still have not developed the fundamental skills. To improve the reading skills of this cohort, we need to get them reading, because the only way to advance in reading is to practice. But what content can they read to practice? With this mismatch in age and reading level, there simply are not enough choices for books or articles that these readers can connect with, that they can care about reading, that they want to read. They lack content that is both relevant and readable.

How do we break this cycle? How do we motivate reading for those who have fallen so far behind?

At Story Shares, we chose to pursue one angle of this complex problem: more relevant content. Because we know that people will read things they care about, we know that we need to generate more choices that are both accessible and compelling for adults and teens who struggle with

reading.

Our solution began as an experiment. Could we provide struggling teen and adult readers with new books to choose from that would motivate them to spend time reading? Better yet, could we *create* the kinds of books needed: ones that are meaningful and relevant but written at lower reading levels?

The results from this experiment were so compelling that our organization was born. We learned that yes, we *could* build a collection of these books. Really, *really* good ones. Books that engage older struggling readers, and books they love to read. And actually, we could do so in a remarkably efficient way: simply by tapping into the existing community of writers and crowdsourcing stories. With a bit of guidance, awareness, and incentives, writers can and will build this library for the readers who need it.

It is just the beginning, but we see a path to filling a critical gap in the global library by providing struggling older readers with a shelf entirely of their own. Our collection of books—now known as Relevant Reads—is designed to blend topics and characters that are intriguing and relatable to teens and adults with language and structure that is approachable at a range of levels. By developing books that make students feel both connected and confident—books they *can* read, and *want* to read—we can effectively ensure that in fact they *will* read, and in turn, read *better*. In this way, we are working to fundamentally alter the literacy landscape: to create a positive cycle, leaving no reader behind.

To learn more about Story Shares, visit storysharescontest.org.

Louise Baigelman, M.Ed., is the co-founder and executive director of Story Shares, a nonprofit literacy organization dedicated to generating more compelling, accessible, and relevant books for teens and adults who struggle with reading. Louise was named one of Forbes 30 Under 30 in Education in 2017, and the International Literacy Association's 30 Under 30 in Literacy in 2016. Louise is a former teacher of reading, writing, and English as a Second Language. She earned her Bachelor's degrees in English and Psychology from Cornell University, and her Master's in Education from Boston University.

