

How to Create Nonreaders

Reflections on Motivation, Learning, and Sharing Power

By Alfie Kohn

Autonomy-supportive teachers seek a student's initiative...whereas controlling teachers seek a student's compliance.

— J. Reeve, E. Bolt, & Y. Cai

Not that you asked, but my favorite Spanish proverb, attributed to the poet Juan Ramón Jiménez, can be translated as follows: "If they give you lined paper, write the other way." In keeping with this general sentiment, I'd like to begin my contribution to an issue of this journal whose theme is "Motivating Students" by suggesting that it is impossible to motivate students.

In fact, it's not really possible to motivate anyone, except perhaps yourself. If you have enough power, sure, you can make people, including students, do things. That's what rewards (e.g., grades) and punishments (e.g., grades) are for. But you can't make them do those things well — "You can command writing, but you can't command good writing," as Donald Murray once remarked — and you can't make them want to do those things. The more you rely on coercion and extrinsic inducements, as a matter of fact, the less interest students are likely to have in whatever they were induced to do.

What a teacher can do - all a teacher can do - is work with students to create a classroom culture, a climate, a curriculum that will nourish and sustain the fundamental inclinations that everyone starts out with: to make sense of oneself and the world, to become increasingly competent at tasks that are regarded as consequential, to connect with (and express oneself to) other people. Motivation - at least intrinsic motivation — is something to be supported, or if necessary revived. It's not something we can instill in students by acting on them in a certain way. You can tap their motivation, in other words, but you can't "motivate them." And if you think this distinction is merely semantic, then I'm afraid we disagree.

On the other hand, what teachers clearly have the ability to do with respect to students' motivation is kill it.[1] That's not just a theoretical possibility; it's taking place right this minute in too many classrooms to count. So, still mindful of the imperative to "write the other way," I'd like to be more specific about how a perversely inclined teacher might effectively destroy students' interest in reading and writing. I'll offer six suggestions without taking a breath, and then linger on the seventh.

1. Quantify their reading assignments. Nothing contributes to a student's interest in (and

proficiency at) reading more than the opportunity to read books that he or she has chosen. But it's easy to undermine the benefits of free reading. All you need to do is stipulate that students must read a certain number of pages, or for a certain number of minutes, each evening. When they're told how much to read, they tend to just "turn the pages" and "read to an assigned page number and stop," says Christopher Ward Ellsasser, a California high school teacher.[2] And when they're told how long to read – a practice more common with teachers of younger students – the results are not much better. As Julie King, a parent, reports, "Our children are now expected to read 20 minutes a night, and record such on their homework sheet. What parents are discovering (surprise) is that those kids who used to sit down and read for pleasure – the kids who would get lost in a book and have to be told to put it down to eat/play/whatever – are now setting the timer...and stopping when the timer dings. . . . Reading has become a chore, like brushing your teeth."

2. Make them write reports. Jim DeLuca, a middle school teacher, summed it up: "The best way to make students hate reading is to make them prove to you that they have read. Some teachers use log sheets on which the students record their starting and finishing page for their reading time. Other teachers use book reports or other projects, which are all easily faked and require almost no reading at all. In many cases, such assignments make the students hate the book they have just read, no matter how they felt about it before the project."[3]

3. Isolate them. I've been in the same book group for 25 years. We read mostly fiction, both classic and contemporary, at the rate of almost a book a month. I shudder to think how few novels I would have read over that period, and how much less pleasure (and insight) I would have derived from those I did manage to read, without the companionship of my fellow readers. Subscribers to this journal are probably familiar with literature circles and other ways of helping students to create a community of readers. You'd want to avoid such innovations – and have kids read (and write) mostly on their own – if your goal were to cause them to lose interest in what they're doing.

4. Focus on skills. Children grow to love reading when it's about making meaning, when they're confronted directly by provocative ideas, compelling characters, delicious prose. But that love may never bloom if all the good stuff is occluded by too much attention to the machinery – or, worse, the approved vocabulary for describing that machinery. Knowing the definition of dramatic irony or iambic pentameter has the same relationship to being literate that memorizing the atomic weight of nitrogen has to doing science. When I look back on my brief career teaching high school English, I think I would have been far more successful had I asked a lot fewer questions that have only one correct answer. I should have helped the kids to dive headfirst into the realm of metaphor rather than wasting their time on how a metaphor differs from a simile. "School teaches that literacy is about a set of skills, not a way to engage a part of the world," as Eliot Washor and his colleagues recently wrote. "Consequently, many young people come to associate reading with schooling rather than with learning more about what interests them."[4]

5. Offer them incentives. Scores of studies have confirmed that rewards tend to lead people to lose interest in whatever they had to do to snag them. This principle has been replicated with many different populations (across genders, ages, and nationalities) and with a variety of tasks as well as different kinds of inducements (money, A's, food, and praise, to name four).[5] You may succeed in getting students to read a book by dangling a reward in front of them for doing so, but their interest in reading, per se, is likely to evaporate – or, in the case of kids who have little interest to begin with, is unlikely to take root – because you've sent the message that reading is something one wouldn't want to do. (Duh. If it was fun, why would they be bribing me to do it?) Elaborate commercial programs (think Accelerated Reader or Book It!) may be the most efficient way to teach kids that reading isn't pleasurable in its own right, but ordinary grades will do just as well in a pinch. As far as I can tell, every single study that has examined grades and intrinsic motivation has

found that the former has a negative effect on the latter.[6]

6. Prepare them for tests. Just as a teacher's grade can be every bit as effective at killing motivation as imported incentive programs, so a teacher's quiz can hold its own against your state's standardized exam. It's not the test itself that does the damage; it's what comes before. Heidegger said that life is lived toward - informed by and in anticipation of - death (Sein zum Tode). By analogy, a classroom where learning is always pointed to a test (Lernen zum Examen?) is one where ideas, and the act of reading, are experienced as just so many means to an end. That, of course, is exactly the same effect that rewards create, so if your classroom is one that emphasizes tests and grades, the damage is effectively doubled. And if those tests and grades are mostly focused on memorizing facts and mastering mechanical skills, well, you've won the Triple Crown at creating a roomful of nonreaders.

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7. Restrict their choices. Teachers have less autonomy these days than ever before. The predominant version of school reform, with its emphasis on "accountability" and its use of very specific curriculum standards enforced by tests, proceeds from the premise that teachers need to be told what, and how, to teach. At the same time, this movement confuses excellence with uniformity ("All students in ninth grade will . . .") and with mere difficulty (as if that which is more "rigorous" were necessarily better). It's now reaching its apotheosis with an initiative to impose the same [core standards](#) on every public school classroom in the nation. This effort has been sponsored primarily by corporate executives, politicians, and test manufacturers, but, shamefully, certain education organizations, including NCTE, have failed to take a principled stand in opposition. Instead, they have eagerly accepted whatever limited role in the design of standards they're permitted by the corporate sponsors, thereby giving the impression that this prescriptive, one-size-fits-all approach to schooling enjoys legitimacy and the support of educators.

The bigger picture here, which transcends and predates national standards, features top-down control all the way along the education food chain, from legislators and state school officials to school boards to superintendents to principals to teachers. That means the pivotal question for teachers - a moral as well as a practical question - is whether they will treat students the way they, themselves, are being treated . . . or the way they wish they were being treated.

Those who choose the latter course - a "working with" approach - make a point of bringing students into the process of making decisions whenever possible. Teachers who choose the former - a "doing to" approach - may, as I say, be taking their cue from the management style of those who seek to micromanage them. Then again, they may be reproducing the teacher-centered classrooms with which they're familiar. Or perhaps they just find it difficult to give up control. As long-time educators Harvey Daniels and Marilyn Bizar put it rather provocatively, "Teachers probably wouldn't have originally chosen their vocation if they didn't crave the spotlight on some deep psychological level. The hunger to 'really teach something' has probably derailed more student-centered innovations than administrative cowardice and textbook company co-option combined." [7]

Mea culpa. When I taught, almost every classroom decision was made unilaterally by me: what students would read, in what format they would respond to the readings, how their learning would be assessed, how much time would be devoted to a book or topic, whether a given task would be done in small groups or as a whole class, how conflicts would be resolved, whether homework was really necessary (and, if so, what would be assigned and when it would be due), how the chairs were arranged and what was posted on the walls. To be honest, it never occurred to me to ask rather than to tell. After all, it was my classroom, wasn't it?

Well, yes, it was, but not because it had to be – only because I kept all the power to myself. And my students were the poorer for it.

The sad irony is that as children grow older and become more capable of making decisions, they're given less opportunity to do so in schools. In some respects, teenagers actually have less to say about their learning – and about the particulars of how they'll spend their time in school each day – than do kindergarteners. Thus, the average American high school is excellent preparation for adult life. . . assuming that one lives in a totalitarian society.

When parents ask, "What did you do in school today?", kids often respond, "Nothing." Howard Gardner pointed out that they're probably right, because "typically school is done to students." [8] This sort of enforced passivity is particularly characteristic of classrooms where students are excluded from any role in shaping the curriculum, where they're on the receiving end of lectures and questions, assignments and assessments. One result is a conspicuous absence of critical, creative thinking – something that (irony alert!) the most controlling teachers are likely to blame on the students themselves, who are said to be irresponsible, unmotivated, apathetic, immature, and so on. But the fact is that kids learn to make good decisions by making decisions, not by following directions.

Conversely, students who have almost nothing to say about what happens in class are more likely to act out, tune out, burn out, or simply drop out. Again, it takes some courage to face the fact that these responses are related to what we're doing, or not doing. And the same is true of my larger point in this essay: A lack of opportunity to make decisions may well manifest itself in a lack of interest in reading and writing. Were that our goal, our single best strategy might be to run a traditional teacher-centered, teacher-directed classroom.

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At this point, I'll abandon the somewhat labored conceit of showing you how to kill interest and instead try to suggest, in more straightforward fashion, some ways to think about how students can play a more active role in their own learning. My assumption is that if you've read this far, you'd probably like to support their desire to learn and read.

First, then, a few general principles:

1. Supporting their autonomy isn't just about having them pick this over that. "The experience of self-determination is not something that can be given to the student through the presentation of an array of teacher-determined options (e.g., 'Here are six books; which do you want to read today?')" [9]. I think there are two insights here. The first is that deeper learning and enthusiasm require us to let students generate possibilities rather than just choosing items from our menu; construction is more important than selection. The second is that what we really need to offer is "autonomy support," an idea that's psychological, not just pedagogical. It's derived from a branch of psychology called self-determination theory, founded by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, among others. To support students' autonomy is to meet their need to be in control of their own lives, to offer opportunities to decide along with the necessary guidance and encouragement, to "minimiz[e] the salience of evaluative pressure and any sense of coercion in the classroom" and "maximiz[e] students' perceptions of having a voice and choice." [10]

In 1993 I wrote about the advantages of offering voice and choice, detailing how students benefited intellectually, morally, and psychologically, according to the available research. [11] Since then, the data have continued to accumulate. Two experts in the field offered this summary in 2006:

Empirical research has shown that students with autonomy-supportive teachers, compared with students with controlling teachers, experience not only greater perceived autonomy, but also more positive functioning in terms of their classroom engagement, emotionality, creativity, intrinsic motivation, psychological well-being, conceptual understanding, academic achievement, and persistence in school.[12]

2. Autonomy can be supported — and choices can be made — collectively. While it is surely important for students to be able to make some decisions that apply only to themselves, many more opportunities should be available for the class to figure out things together. In fact, one might say that when autonomy and community are combined, they define a concept more often invoked than practiced in our society: democracy.

Even during the absurdly short class periods still being used in most high schools, it makes sense to devote some of that limited time to class meetings in which students can solve problems and make decisions. I once sat in on several classes taught by Keith Grove at Dover-Sherborn High School near Boston and noticed that such meetings were critical to his teaching; he had come to realize that the feeling of community (and active participation) they produced made whatever time remained for the explicit curriculum far more productive than devoting the whole period to talking at rows of silent kids. Together the students decided whether to review the homework in small groups or as a whole class. Together they decided when it made sense to schedule their next test. (After all, what's the point of assessment — to have students show you what they know when they're ready to do so, or to play "gotcha"?) Interestingly, Grove says that his classes are quite structured even though they're unusually democratic, and he sees his job as being "in control of putting students in control."

3. It's not all or nothing. Teachers who favor a traditional approach to teaching sometimes offer a caricature of an autonomy-supportive classroom — one devoid of intellectual challenge where kids do whatever they feel like — in order to rationalize rejecting this model. But autonomy support not only doesn't exclude structure, as Keith Grove reminds us; it also doesn't rule out active teacher involvement. That involvement can be direct, such as when teacher and students negotiate a mutually acceptable due date for an essay. (Instead of "You folks choose," it may be "Let's figure this out together.") Or the involvement can be indirect, with the teacher setting up broad themes for the course and students making decisions within those parameters. But that doesn't mean we should be prepared to share power with students only about relatively minor issues. It may make sense to start with that and then challenge ourselves to involve them in thinking about bigger questions as you (and they) become more comfortable with a democratic classroom.

4. "See above." The half-dozen suggestions for killing interest in reading in the first part of this essay don't become irrelevant just because students are given more authority to direct their learning, individually and collectively. For example, rewards are still counterproductive even if kids get to choose what goodie they'll get. And there's reason to worry if a language arts course is focused mostly on narrowly defined facts and skills even if students are permitted to make decisions about the details. (As one of Bianca's suitors observes in *The Taming of the Shrew*, "There's small choice in rotten apples.") Even autonomy support in its richest sense works best in the context of a course that's pedagogically valuable in other ways — and avoids various familiar but counterproductive practices.

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Finally, here are a few specific suggestions for bringing students in on making decisions, offered here in the hope that they will spark you to think of others in the same spirit:

- * Let students sample a work of literature, then generate their own questions and discussion topics – for themselves and one another.
- * Before having students help each other to revise their writing, invite them to brainstorm possible questions they might ask about its construction and its impact on the reader (rather than having them simply apply your editing guidelines or, worse, evaluating the writing against a prefabricated rubric[13]).
- * Have students think together about ideas for the papers they'll write, then follow up once the writing is underway by inviting each student to ask the group for suggestions. Encourage discussion about the rationale for, and usefulness of, each idea that emerges in order to promote reflection that may well benefit everyone.
- * When you're planning to respond to their journals or other writings, begin by asking students – individually and as a class – what kinds of responses would be most helpful to them. (Wouldn't you prefer that administrators proceed that way when offering feedback on your teaching?)
- * Let students choose the audience for whom they're writing, as well as the genre in which they respond to something they've read (e.g., play, op-ed, speech).
- * Check in periodically with students during class meetings about how the course is going for them, whether the decision-making process seems to be working, whether the climate is conducive to learning. Ask what might make discussions and assignments more productive and satisfying – but only if you're really open to making changes based on what they tell you.
- * Bring students in on the process of assessment by asking them to join you in thinking about alternatives to conventional tests. "How can you show me what you understood, where you still need help, and what I may need to rethink about how I taught the unit?" Beyond the format of the assessment, invite them as a class to suggest criteria by which someone's work might be evaluated – and, later, have them apply those criteria to what they've done.
- * Remember that group decision making doesn't require voting, which is basically just adversarial majoritarianism. Help them to acquire the skills and disposition to reach for a deeper kind of democracy, one in which compromises are generated and consensus is reached.

To be willing to give up some control is to avoid getting too invested in the amazing course you designed. Strive to take pleasure and pride from how you help students to learn and become excited about learning, not just from the curriculum itself. Even the most thoughtful lesson, the cleverest assignment, the richest reading list is much less likely to goose students and engage them and help them to think more subtly, if you came up with it on your own and imposed it on them. What matters is not what we teach; it's what they learn,[14] and the probability of real learning is far higher when the students have a lot to say about both the content and the process.

The best teachers, I find, spend at least some of their evenings smacking themselves on the forehead – figuratively, at least – as they reflect on something that happened during the day. "Why did I decide that, when I could have asked the kids?" And, thinking about some feature of the course yet to come: "Is this a choice I should be making for the students rather than with them?" One Washington, D.C. creative writing teacher was pleased with himself for announcing to students that it was up to them to decide how to create a literary magazine – until he realized later that he had incrementally reasserted control. "I had taken a potentially empowering project and turned it into a

showcase of what [I] could do.”[15] It takes insight and guts to catch oneself at what amounts to an exercise in pseudodemocracy. Keeping hold of power — overtly for traditionalists, perhaps more subtly for those of us who think of ourselves as enlightened progressives — is a hell of a lot easier than giving it away.

But if we’re serious about helping students to fall in love with literature, to get a kick out of making words fall together in just the right order, then we have to be attentive to what makes these things more, and less, likely to happen. It may take us awhile, but ultimately our classrooms should turn the usual default setting on its head so the motto becomes: Let the students decide except when there’s a good reason why we have to decide for them.

NOTES

1. The management theorist Frederick Herzberg made an analogous argument about the asymmetrical motivational properties of money in the workplace: Just because paying people too little can be demotivating doesn’t mean that paying them more will elicit greater satisfaction or more motivation to do their best. This helps to explain why [pay-for-performance plans are doomed to fail](#).
2. All uncited quotations, like this one, are derived from personal communications.
3. Regie Routman invites us to imagine ourselves on the receiving end of such assignments: “Think about the last time you read a book you loved. Imagine how you would have felt if you had been required to write a book report or a summary that had to include the main idea and supporting details. Or, if at the end of chapters, you’d been required to write answers to questions. For myself, that would have been enough to turn me off to reading the book” (*Literacy at the Crossroads* [Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1996], p. 177).
4. Elliot Washor, Charles Mojkowski, and Deborah Foster, “Living Literacy,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, March 2009, p. 522.
5. See Edward L. Deci, Richard Koestner, and Richard M. Ryan, “A Meta-analytic Review of Experiments Examining the Effects of Extrinsic Rewards on Intrinsic Motivation,” *Psychological Bulletin* 125 (1999): 627-668; and my book *Punished by Rewards* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993).
6. I review some of this research, as well as studies that find a detrimental effect of grades on quality of learning and preference for challenge, in *Punished by Rewards* (op. cit.) and *The Schools Our Children Deserve* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), as well as in [“From Degrading to De-Grading.”](#) *High School Magazine*, March 1999, pp. 38-43.
7. Harvey Daniels and Marilyn Bizar, *Methods That Matter* (York, ME: Stenhouse, 1998), p. 12.
8. Howard Gardner, *The Unschooled Mind* (New York: Basic, 1991), p. 243.
9. Johnmarshall Reeve, Glen Nix, and Diane Hamm, “Testing Models of the Experience of Self-Determination in Intrinsic Motivation and the Conundrum of Choice,” *Journal of Educational Psychology* 95 (2003), p. 388.
10. Christopher P. Niemic and Richard M. Ryan, “Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness in the Classroom: Applying Self-Determination Theory to Educational Practice,” *Theory and*

Research in Education 7 (2009), p. 139. For an argument that “cognitive autonomy support” may be more important for student engagement with learning than “procedural” or “organizational” autonomy support, see Candice R. Stefanou, Kathleen C. Perencevich, Matthew DiCintio, and Julianne C. Turner, “Supporting Autonomy in the Classroom: Ways Teachers Encourage Student Decision Making and Ownership,” *Educational Psychologist* 39 (2004): 98-110.

11. See Alfie Kohn, [“Choices for Children: Why and How to Let Students Decide,”](#) *Phi Delta Kappan*, September 1993, pp. 8-20.

12. Johnmarshall Reeve and Hyungshim Jang, “What Teachers Say and Do to Support Students’ Autonomy During a Learning Activity,” *Journal of Educational Psychology* 98 (2006), p. 210. Many of these effects were confirmed in a large meta-analysis published two years later: see Erika A. Patall, Harris Cooper, and Jorgianne Civey Robinson, “The Effects of Choice on Intrinsic Motivation and Related Outcomes: A Meta-Analysis of Research Findings,” *Psychological Bulletin* 134 (2008): 270-300.

13. On this last point, see Maja Wilson, *Rethinking Rubrics in Writing Assessment* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2006); and Kohn, [“The Trouble with Rubrics,”](#) *English Journal*, March 2006, pp. 12-15.

14. See my article [“It’s Not What We Teach; It’s What They Learn,”](#) *Education Week*, September 10, 2008, pp. 32, 26.

15. Sami Miranda, “Yours, Mine, or Ours?” *Rethinking Schools*, Summer 1999, p. 10.

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