

Following Student Leads (Tips for Tutors)

Our students often can guide our instruction. They can show us what they need to learn next. My wife and I work with several students. Recently, one of them told us that she wants to be able to talk better with people. She wants her words to sound right. Our student asked about the rules. My wife listened to her. We went out and found a simple guide to building grammar and each week my wife introduces her to something new: proper nouns, singular and plural, verbs, and punctuation marks. We are teaching our student what she had an interest in learning. We are following her lead.

Lucy McCormack Calkins writes in The Art OF Teaching Writing, “My parents balanced their interest in projects with an interest in achievement. In whatever our area of interest, they provided us with the best available instruction. I have come to believe in this balance. I learn best when I am deeply absorbed by a topic and when this involvement is guided by well-timed tips from experts.” To our student, we are those experts. We listen as our students read and watch them create messages when they write. If we are lucky, we find places to stop in for a bit of advice. Places where we can provide a quick lesson then back to the reading and writing.

Another of our students was confusing vowels as she read. We told her that the vowels all make more than one sound, then went on to teach her the long vowel/consonant/silent e pattern. Another day, she was wondering about t contractions. My wife and I stopped and introduced contractions to her. The idea is to use these mini-lessons to make the challenge of reading and writing easier for our students.

Another way to reinforce a positive behavior you notice about the reading and writing is to stop and quickly show your student the good things they are doing. For example, a student was reading for weeks in choppy phrases. One day, she began reading words together so they sounded like talking. She suddenly was reading the punctuation. My wife and I praised her for her fluent reading. It was a behavior that we wanted to encourage. Our students aren't always aware of the good things that they do.

Follow your student's lead. If he/she needs to fill out an application for a job or a loan - teach them how. If they are struggling with learning the rules of the road, pick up a driver's manual and study it with them. In the book, Tutor, the authors write, “Learning to read and write is more than moving through grade levels and filling out worksheets to show mastery of the proper skills. As tutors, we all need to validate the literary events our student engage in daily. “If your student wants to read a picture book to her child or write a letter to an old friend, teach them how. Let your students guide your instruction and teach them the things they so want to learn.

Works Cited:

1. The Art of Teaching Writing, Lucy McCormack Calkins, copyright 1986 by Heinemann Educational Books, Inc.
2. Tutor, Judy Blankenship Cheatham, PH.D., Ruth Johnson Colvin, Lester L. Laminack, copyright 1993 by Literacy Volunteers of America, Inc.

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