

Learning from the Start: Bringing the Conditions of Learning to Life in Our Classrooms Through Independent Reading

By Debra Crouch

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"Hurry up! She's got new books!" the circle of children shouted as I sat in their midst on a Monday morning in early spring. Those finishing their morning routine scurried to join their classmates and they all eagerly leaned forward, anticipating the gifts in the bag at my feet. For inside the bag, the children knew, were the results of my latest forage at the local library. When a bag appeared (usually every other week; sometimes more often), fresh and interesting books, often titles requested by the children themselves, would be available in our library and so the chorus of voices began:

"Did you get more Dogman books? We only have five!"

"What about Bad Kitty? I love those!"

"Did you find any more books by Patrice Barton? She draws such good pictures."

As I pulled each book from the bag, squeals arose from students followed by the inevitable questions and comments:

"Can I have that book for my book collection?"

"I'm checking that book out!"

"Can I read it first?"

To each remark, I'd say with a smile, *"Perhaps. Let's put it in the library first so you can all read it."* (Sometimes, though, a book did go straight to the child who had requested it!)

Next came ideas on where to place the book in the library.

"It should go in Great Authors!"

"Or Great Characters!"

"That's a Minh Lê book!"

"Virginia Loh-Hagan—remember when she came to our school!"

"Oh, that bug book should go in Insects!"

In the beginning of the school year, I had to encourage those suggestions. Now, my role was to explore and extend their thinking. *"Hmm...why do you think that would be a good spot for this book?"*

Our library was firmly established. A gift, indeed!

CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT FOR LEARNING

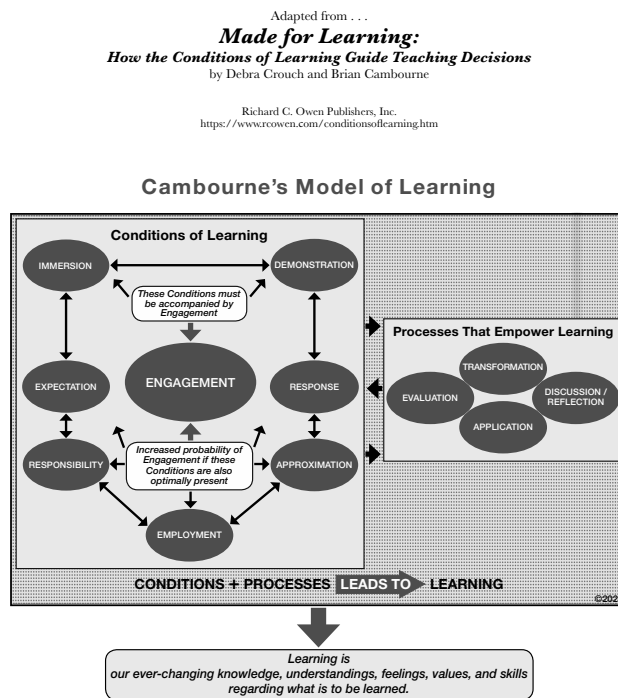
Envision the classroom environment where this story took place—it is an ever-evolving ecosystem, one where an effective mix of social, emotional, physical, and intellectual aspects make learning more likely to occur. A central dynamic affecting the quality of this classroom's ecosystem is Independent Reading, where the children experienced rich and varied opportunities to synthesize all they are learning about making meaning of texts. Benefits of Independent Reading are vast. They include

developing reading stamina, vocabulary, and background knowledge (International Literacy Association, 2019). Independent reading develops the trust necessary for learners to take risks, actively construct meanings and ask questions for themselves (Scoggin & Schneewind, 2021). In addition, children develop reading “habits,” those behaviors which define life-long readers: choosing books they love, sharing books with others, and reading books “as one would breathe air, to fill up and live” (Dillard, 2013).

Environments such as these don't happen by chance; they are the result of intentional decisions about the social, emotional, physical, and intellectual facets of learning and teaching. This article will explore some of the decisions teachers make about the practice of Independent Reading, consider how these decisions evolve over time, and reflect on how those decisions influence the Conditions of Learning, a lens for exploring how to bring a learning environment to life.

In *Made for Learning: How the Conditions of Learning Guide Teaching Decisions* (2020), Brian Cambourne and I describe the ever-evolving classroom ecosystem through the lens of interrelated and synergistic conditions that nurture learning (Figure 1. Conditions of Learning model with definitions). Put simply, these Conditions of Learning underlie and support all learning and teaching. The Conditions include **Immersion** and **Demonstration**, where learners are surrounded by and witness full, rich examples of what they're learning. For these examples to support the learner, they must be accompanied by **Engagement**, articulated in our model as a set of principles. These principles are that learners see themselves as “doers” of what they're learning, understand its purpose, feel they won't risk any physical or psychological harm as they learn, and are surrounded by a community of learners they admire and want to emulate. These principles are more likely to develop within an environment that fosters five additional Conditions: **Expectations**, **Responsibility**, **Employment**, **Approximation**, and **Response**. These conditions create a tone that gives rise to the Engagement central to all learning.

Figure 1.



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Immersion	Immersion is when someone is surrounded by demonstrations (i.e. actions and artifacts) which serve as a platform for potential learning and meaning-making. Learners witness a holistic, visual and/or aural experience of this prospective learning, with all the physical, social, emotional, and intellectual aspects present.
Demonstration	Demonstrations are artifacts and/or actions that provide multiple, holistic opportunities to recognize and appreciate, know and understand, and act and apply certain skills, behaviors, and “know-how” in the world.
Engagement	Engagement is a participatory stance taken by a learner about what is being demonstrated. Engagement is more likely to occur if: 1.) learners see themselves as “doers” of the behavior in which they are immersed; 2.) they understand how these demonstrations are important to their lives; 3.) they believe they aren't risking physical or psychological harm by attempting the behavior; and 4.) they like, trust, respect, and want to emulate the person demonstrating.
Expectation	Expectations involve beliefs about a learner's capabilities, both how learners view themselves and how they are viewed by significant others. Often, this belief, or sense of self, is signaled through the messages and language significant others use when communicating with learners.
Responsibility	Independent learners are learners who know how make decisions, about what, when, and how they will learn. Only truly independent learners can be responsible for what and when they take from demonstrations.
Employment	Learners require time and opportunity to practice their evolving abilities with what is being learned. This practice occurs with others and on one's own.
Approximation	Learners approximate, or make attempts, when learning. There is no expectation for approximations to be perfect or permanent.
Response	Learners receive feedback from a more knowledgeable other on what is being learned. To be effective, responses should be honest, positive, timely, relevant, and have no hidden agenda.

Processes That Empower Learning

Transformation	Learners transform what was demonstrated into something that is uniquely theirs. Transformation isn't simply copying the person demonstrating or memorizing by rote what is being taught but is individually constructed by the learner.
Discussion/Reflection	Talk with others (or, as is the case with reflection, talk with ourselves) about our thinking allows us to construct, clarify, interpret, adjust, and expand our understandings.
Application	Learners need opportunities to apply what they've engaged with in demonstrations. Whereas with the Condition of Employment, the learner decides what to practice, with Application, the teacher determines what is practiced.
Evaluation	Self-evaluation of our own learning (what we learned) and learning process (how we learned) is important for learners.

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The decisions teachers make as they set up and operate classroom spaces put these eight Conditions in place. However, an important caveat to the Conditions of Learning exists—though we often think about and discuss them separately, they don't function separately. Any decision we make to affect one condition, in turn, affects them all.

TEACHING DECISIONS THAT PUT THE CONDITIONS OF LEARNING IN PLACE

TIME

Time in a classroom is finite, and teachers determine how it is used on a minute-by-minute basis. In classrooms where teachers are aware of the Conditions of Learning and intentionally consider how to strengthen them, teachers include time every day for Independent Reading. But, even when teachers choose to include Independent Reading, still they often wonder and worry about spending precious instructional time on what is often thought of as “just reading.”

What can ease our troubled minds is considering how our decisions around implementing Independent Reading strengthen the Conditions of Learning and make learning more likely. First, during Independent Reading, children practice what they are learning in self-selected books; the Conditions of Learning refer to practice as **Employment**. Reading is like any other endeavor—it's hard to get good at it unless you practice. In addition, children develop reading identities (Scoggin and Schneewind, 2021) through Independent Reading, which strengthens a belief in themselves as “doers,” the first principle of **Engagement**; this is a reciprocal relationship—engagement, in turn, strengthens reading identity. Furthermore, another principle of **Engagement** is understanding the purpose of what is being learned; in the case of reading, the purpose is making meaning. Neuroscientist Lisa Genova (2021) reminds us that our brains have evolved to remember, or learn, what is meaningful and forget what is not. Genova advises that to make something meaningful, make what you're learning personal. For Independent Reading, that “personal” is book choice. Choosing what you read is central to Independent Reading. Indeed, unless students make and

care about their book choices, their reading and thinking abilities aren't likely to improve.

Figures 2-4: Children need time every day to explore, read, think, and talk about books they've chosen.



SPACE, MATERIALS, AND RESOURCES

Decisions about space, materials, and resources affect Independent Reading, too. If we want children to develop reading identities, they must have access to interesting, memorable books they find great joy in reading. Classroom libraries, then, play a significant role in the literate lives of the children. In a position statement (2017), the National Council of Teachers of English stated, “Classroom libraries—physical or virtual—play a key role in providing access to books and promoting literacy.” Educator Regie Routman (2024) reminds us that being able to access books that “reflect the beautiful, complex, and multifaceted diversity of being human” is often for children the “first glimpse of what might be possible and who they might become in their present and future lives.” Being able to access fascinating and thought-provoking books in the classroom library with ease is essential for Independent Reading to be successful.

How does the classroom library affect the Conditions of Learning? Teachers strengthen the condition of Responsibility, or diminish it, depending on how they structure their library. If teachers organize and label libraries in authentic ways (e.g., by author, genre, series, or topic), children learn to navigate the library according to interests and passions. If the library is organized by reading level, teachers control access in ways that don't make sense to and for readers, limiting children's abilities to make choices and take Responsibility (Routman, 2024; Scoggin & Schneewind, 2021). Approximation is another crucial aspect of learning. As children try out texts to see how the books suit their interests and passions (and their ever-developing reading abilities), children experience a fundamental part of a readerly life.

Figure 5: During the first week of school, children shared books they'd like to have in the library. A check mark was added when books were put in the library.

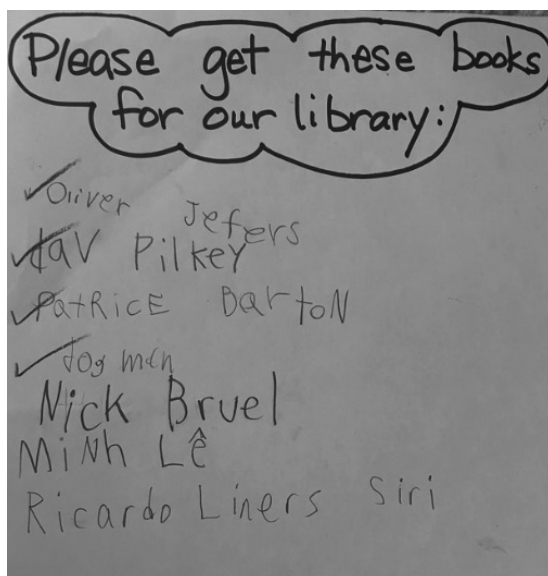


Figure 7 & 8: In the beginning of the school year, have children help organize their library by sorting books into categories. Ask them: What books go together? If the library is already organized (or this occurs later in the school year), re-combine several tubs so children have the experience of determining what books should go together in their library (and, remember, most books can fit in several categories!).

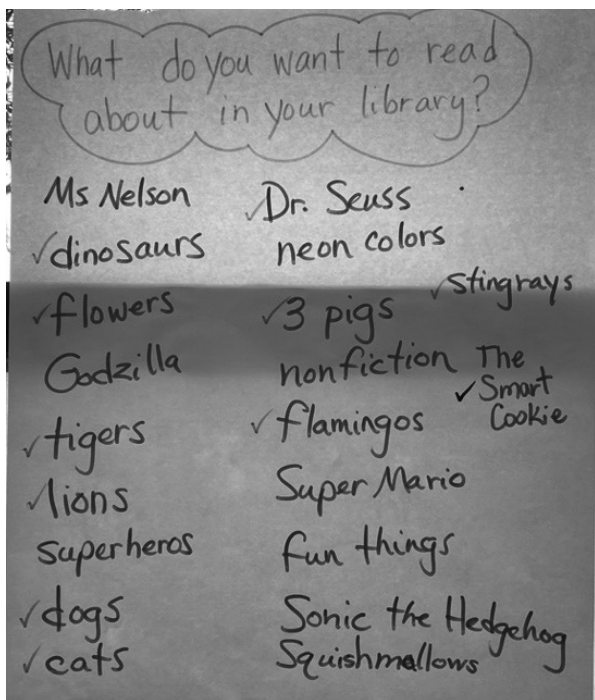


Figure 6: Later, a sign-up sheet invited children to continue independently suggesting books for the library. These lists helped me choose books when I visited the public and school library to get new books for the classroom library.



Figures 9-11: Organizing books by categories such as topic, author, genre, and series makes the library sensible and accessible for children. Begin the school year with only a few tubs and books in the library. Every couple of weeks, add tubs and books based on student interest, passions (who knew cookbooks for kids would be so popular!), and science and social studies topics (e.g., weather, space). And don't forget student-authored books (as the year goes on) and poetry!

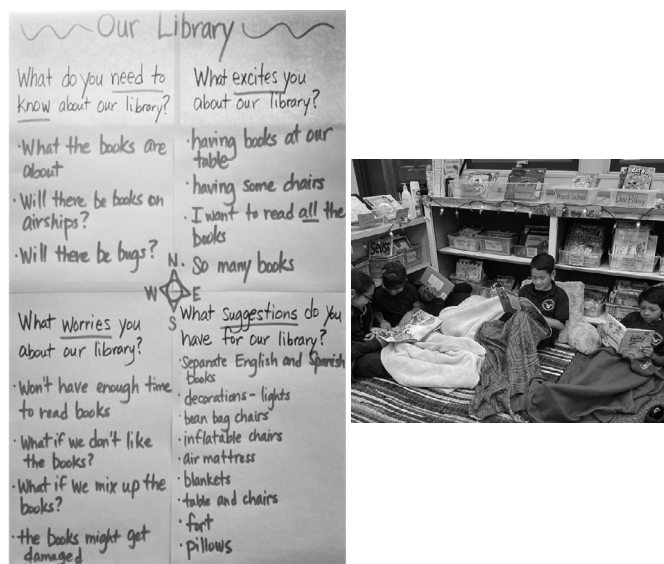


ROUTINES AND BEHAVIORS

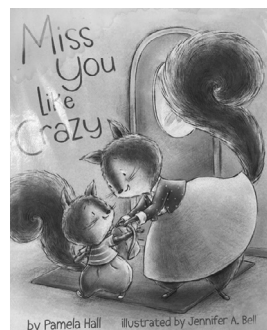
Routines and behaviors are the backbone of a classroom. Teachers spend a great deal of time and effort crafting ways they want their classrooms to function and then teaching these ways to students. Routines for how Independent Reading will operate are just as important as any other part of the classroom day.

Routines and behaviors can definitely strengthen the Conditions of Learning. Those that favor student choice and self-direction reveal the Expectations a teacher holds for learners; the beliefs a learner holds about their own capabilities are part of this condition, too. Choice and self-direction also strengthen Responsibility as students make decisions about their reading lives. Whether the choice and self-direction is where, when, or what to read and share with others, each decision also strengthens the principles of Engagement. As readers learn together in a literate community, their ever-developing mutual like, trust, and respect for the others in the community propels the learning.

Figures 12-13: Using a modified version of Compass Points, a Thinking Routine from Harvard's Project Zero (2024) in the beginning of the school year, the children explored their thinking about the library being created together. As the library evolved across the school year, it reflected many of these early ideas, wishes, and concerns about book choice, time, organization, and design.



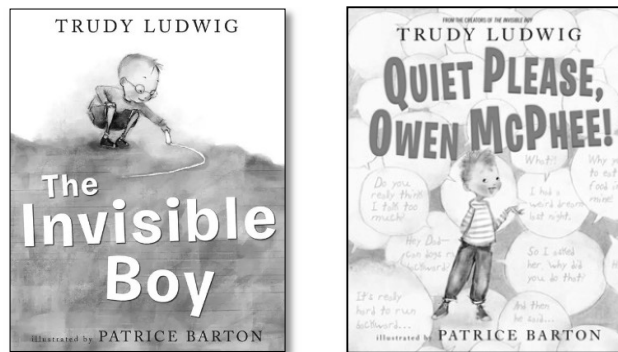
Figures 14-15: In the beginning and throughout the school year, children bring favorite books from home to share with the class. Itzayana's mother read *Miss You Like Crazy* (2014) to her when Itzayana was "little." Later in the school year, as she was reading one of the books from Ann M. Martin's series of graphic novels, *La hermanita de las niñas* (2020), Itzayana checked out the English version of the book from the school library for me so she and I could read and talk about the same book! (You can read more about Itzayana in my newsletter, <https://madeforlearning.substack.com/p/why-a-book-loving-teacher-matters>)



Figures 16-17: Throughout the school year, make space in the classroom for children to share favorite books. This creates and sustains a sense of ownership and community. In fact, Alejandro, a second grade student, suggested the title for this display about favorite books: Our Second Grade Book Community.



Figure 18-19: Read Alouds early in the school year invite children to learn about authors and illustrators who become requested favorites.

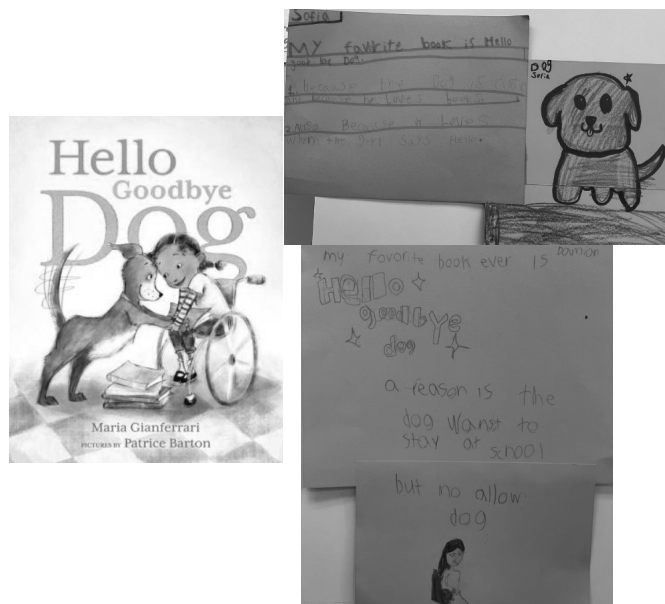


Figures 20-22: Later in the year, illustrator Patrice Barton was a requested favorite from the public library, keeping our classroom library fresh and interesting. Second-graders Sofia and Damian named and wrote about a favorite Patrice Barton book, *Hello, Goodbye, Dog* (2017).

TEACHER LANGUAGE AND BEHAVIOR

Children grow into the intellectual life that surrounds them (Vygotsky, 1978). Independent Reading is a central component of that intellectual life. How teachers think and talk about books influences the kinds of thinking and conversations children will have during Independent Reading. But language is more than just words being used. The texts teachers select to read to and with children and include in the library, the tone teachers use when they and the children interact with books, and the emotions that arise when reading together all contribute to how children view the reading experience.

The ways children think and talk as they read for themselves and interact with peers during Independent Reading emerges from and reflects back Immersion and Demonstration in the classroom. As teachers read, think, and talk with children about books, children develop not only a love of reading, but language for thinking and talking about books. In turn, as teachers and peers listen and respond to children's thinking, trust develops (Scoggin & Schneewind, 2021), a necessary principle of Engagement. The teacher's and peer's open and accepting Response strengthens Engagement, too, by helping children feel safe in their choices, interests, and ideas.



CONCLUSION

Educator Ralph Peterson (1992) calls life in a classroom "an intense social experience." He reminds us that in learning communities, "social life is not snuffed out; it is nurtured and used to advance learning in the best way possible." Independent Reading is a gift we give our children and one we give ourselves, too. This ever-

evolving instructional practice is at the heart of a social and literate classroom, one where the Conditions of Learning thrive. And, when the Conditions of Learning thrive, so do our learners.

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Debra Crouch has more than 30 years of experience teaching and coaching in schools and classrooms across the U.S. and Mexico, supporting educators to make instructional decisions that matter for learners. She has been a classroom teacher, author, coach, conference speaker, and literacy consultant. Debra has developed a multi-grade video series to support Shared and Guided Reading, demonstrating multiple lessons with students to consider how instruction evolves over time. She is a regular contributor to Okapi Educational Publishing's Teacher Talk series. Her videos and articles can be found on her website, *Teaching Decisions*. Debra is co-author with Dr. Brian Cambourne of *Made for Learning: How the Conditions of Learning Guide Teaching Decisions*, which explores the beliefs, practices, and processes of helping someone learn. You can subscribe to Debra's new newsletter at <https://madeforlearning.substack.com/>

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