

ANTHONY J. APPLGATE  
MARY DEKONTY APPLGATE

## The Peter Effect: Reading habits and attitudes of preservice teachers

*Many preservice teachers are not avid readers themselves, and this lack of engagement may be passed on to their students.*

Motivation is only one of many complex, interacting factors that contribute to the acquisition and exercise of reading proficiency. Nonetheless, it has generated a tremendous amount of much-deserved interest among reading researchers over the past 15 years. Nearly all reading experts now agree that both skill and will must be considered in the conceptualization of the ideal reader, the one with broad interests who samples widely and deeply from available sources of text and is motivated to read on a regular basis.

But the proportion of students in the United States who have become avid and enthusiastic readers has been characterized by some researchers as shockingly small (Guthrie, McGough, Bennett, & Rice, 1996). Research studies have repeatedly suggested that a large proportion of students are aliterate; that is, they choose not to read despite their cognitive ability to do so (Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988; Campbell, Voelkl, & Donahue, 1997; Foertsch, 1992; Greaney & Hegarty, 1987). These findings have provoked an intense interest in both the nature and the educational experiences of ideal readers, in the hope that we might shed some light on the problem of aliteracy.

Some reading experts have referred to ideal readers as *engaged* readers who read regularly and enthusiastically for a variety of their own purposes (Guthrie & Anderson, 1999). The motivations that drive engaged readers have come under particular scrutiny (Metsala & McCann, 1997), because

motivation is related to the amount of reading a student will do (Guthrie, Wigfield, Metsala, & Cox, 1999; Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997). This finding is all the more important because the amount of reading an individual does is related to achievement in reading (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Guthrie, 2001) and even to an increased level of text comprehension (Guthrie & Wigfield, 1999).

One element that seems to distinguish engaged readers is intrinsic motivation (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991). Intrinsically motivated readers engage in reading for its own sake and enjoy satisfying their own curiosity. Intrinsically motivated readers are similar to engaged readers in that they report higher amounts of reading than do other students (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997) and consequently attain higher levels of achievement in reading (Anderson et al., 1988; Cipelewski & Stanovich, 1992). They also perform better on standardized tests of reading (Gottfried, 1990) and receive higher grades in school (Sweet, Guthrie, & Ng, 1998).

Another dimension of intrinsic motivation is the presence of an effective implicit model of reading or a system of beliefs that affects a reader's goals and strategies for reading. Rosenblatt (1978) wrote of one such model in her description of aesthetic and efferent stances. The reader with an efferent stance is concerned with carrying away information gleaned from the reading. The aesthetic stance fits Lewis's description (1961): "[I]n reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself...I see with a myriad eyes, but it is still I who see" (p. 141). The aesthetic reader sees reading as active immersion into a text and the opportunity to live vicariously through the situations and lives of its characters.

## The influence of the teacher

Given what we know about reading engagement, the challenge to the teacher is to create classroom environments that promote engaged reading. Teachers are often well positioned to do so. Not only do teachers have a significant influence upon a child's acquisition of the habit of engaged reading (Allington, 1994; Ruddell, 1995; Skinner & Belmont, 1993), but also teachers appear very much aware of the need for motivating their students to read (O'Flahavan et al., 1992).

It stands to reason that if reading models affect readers then teachers will be influenced by their own model of reading or system of beliefs as well. Ruddell (1995), for example, distinguished between influential and noninfluential teachers. Influential teachers are those who use highly effective and motivating teaching strategies and create a sense of excitement about what they teach. Ruddell identified influential teachers, at least partly, on the basis of their adherence to Rosenblatt's (1978) aesthetic stance. In the aesthetic stance readers become absorbed in the text and live through the experiences of others. In contrast, the efferent stance has its primary emphasis in the ability to acquire and retrieve information. It is important to note that the efferent stance is completely appropriate in the reading of content materials. When it is applied to literature, however, it can reduce a story to a mere collection of facts to be memorized and retrieved. Ruddell found that influential teachers tend strongly toward the aesthetic stance in their literacy instruction, while noninfluential teachers use predominantly efferent instructional strategies (Ruddell, 1994; Ruddell, Draheim, & Barnes, 1990).

A teacher's aesthetic reading stance may be all the more important because, as Gambrell (1996) wrote, reading motivation is fostered in classrooms where the teacher is a reading model. Teachers "become reading models when they share their own reading experiences with students and emphasize how reading enhances and enriches their lives" (p. 20). Lundberg and Linnakyla (1993) even reported linkages between student achievement and the amount of reading done by their teachers. It appears that teachers' beliefs about reading as well as their reading habits may have a significant effect

upon the motivation and engagement levels of their students.

## Classroom practices and engagement in reading

Teachers who are enthusiastic readers are more likely to use instructional activities such as literature circles and discussions, which promote engagement (Morrison, Jacobs, & Swinyard, 1999). Teachers with an efferent stance toward literature would be less likely to see the value in interaction and the exchange of ideas. If the primary objective of efferent readers is to identify ideas that the author wishes to convey, then discussion and social interaction may be viewed as distracting. Thus the teacher's view of reading may affect the choice of instructional strategies that may, in turn, play a significant role in the development of reading engagement among students.

Teachers who are engaged and enthusiastic readers are more likely to encourage and cultivate at least some kindred spirits in their classrooms. It is in the classrooms of such teachers that children are more apt to encounter teaching strategies that foster a love for reading and a high level of engagement in reading.

## Our experiences in teacher preparation

But what if a significant number of the teachers of the future had no love of reading themselves? As teacher educators specializing in the teaching of reading and literacy, we were stunned to find that so many of our students had no use for reading other than as an academic obligation. For these students, we had to lay down the foundation of a love of reading that we had hoped to find and build upon.

Through subsequent conversations with our students, we arrived at many of the same conclusions we saw in Ruddell's (1995) work. Avid readers saw themselves as emotionally and intellectually involved with text, as vicarious participants in the lives and experiences of the characters about whom they read—in short, as aesthetic readers. Many reluctant readers, on the other hand, focused their attention on the efferent task of retaining the

**FIGURE 1**  
**Pilot study survey**

**Reading survey**

1. What reading did you do this past summer? Are there any titles or authors that you can recall? In general, what did you read for recreation?
2. Who is your favorite author (or an author whose writing you may like)? What in particular do you like about this author's work? If you have no particular favorites, simply say "None."
3. When you think of yourself in general as a reader, how much enjoyment do you associate with reading? What reason(s) do you have for responding in this way?
4. When you consider the instruction in reading that you received in school, how much emphasis was placed upon
  - (a) remembering the details of what you read?
  - (b) your own reactions to or interpretations of what you read?
  - (c) discussing your reactions and interpretations with classmates and/or teachers?
  - (d) completing assignments or reports associated with the reading?
5. When you consider your early elementary school reading experiences with learning to read, do you recall them as primarily positive, negative, or neutral? Why?
6. Did your experiences with reading at home differ from your experiences at school? If so, how?
7. Was the greatest emphasis of your early school experiences associated with enjoying stories, mastering reading skills, or a combination of the two?

information included in what they read. Their approach to literature tended to be a study of the genre, the craft of the writer, but not a sharing in the experiences of true-to-life individuals.

We must emphasize that reluctant readers can be highly motivated, disciplined, and high-achieving students. But they tend to view reading as an academic task and not as a joy to be shared with others. Because teachers, particularly elementary school teachers, play a significant role in motivating children to read, a lukewarm or task-oriented attitude toward reading can be problematic. Teachers often motivate their students to read by sharing their own enthusiasm for reading. But what if they have no love for reading?

We began to think of the problem in somewhat biblical proportions, recalling the story of the Apostle Peter who, when asked for money by a beggar who had been crippled from birth, replied by stating that he could not give what he did not have (Acts 3:5). We began to refer to the "Peter Effect" as the condition characterizing those teachers who are charged with conveying to their students an enthusiasm for reading that they do not have. After many interactions with students whom we regarded as unenthusiastic readers, we began to design a study to estimate how widespread the Peter Effect really was.

## The pilot study

The subjects in the first study we conducted were 195 university sophomores enrolled in the initial courses of teacher certification programs in elementary education. We constructed a pilot survey of reading habits and attitudes and administered the instrument early in the fall semester, immediately after the students had returned from their summer break. We hoped to minimize the effects of the social desirability of responses by conducting the survey before the students could discern our own philosophy about the nature of reading.

The sample for the pilot study was drawn from two very different U.S. institutions. Seventy-six students were enrolled at an urban university in a blue-collar area of a large East Coast city. For students admitted to the university, combined verbal-quantitative Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores average 920. Admission to the university is characterized as "less competitive" (Barron's Profiles, 2002).

One hundred nineteen students were drawn from a university located in a semiurban, white-collar area on the outskirts of the same city. The university has a local reputation for academic rigor, and the combined average SAT of its students exceeds 1220. Admission to the university is char-

acterized by Barron's Profiles (2002) as "very competitive."

We believed that such a contrast in samples may shed additional light on the nature of reading attitude and motivation. Because broad and frequent reading is a contributing factor to higher SAT scores, we wanted to see if higher scores in a traditional measure of academic preparedness would be related to the reading habits and attitudes of teacher candidates.

## The survey instrument

We developed a brief questionnaire for the pilot study, designed to focus on reading habits and attitudes as well as to help us explore some potential influences on the formation of those attitudes (see Figure 1). We used open-ended questions largely because we wanted to invite students to share their experiences and because we feared that a forced-choice questionnaire would not provide us with as effective an opportunity to listen to student voices.

We assessed level of reading activity by asking students what reading they had done over the past summer. We then contrasted the amount of reading that they did with their self-reported level of enjoyment associated with reading. We expected that enthusiastic and engaged readers would have made time to do a reasonable amount of leisure reading over the course of a summer. We then asked the students to rate their reading experiences in early elementary school and in their homes as primarily positive, negative, or neutral. In addition, we asked subjects to identify a favorite author and to identify their early school experiences with reading stories as emphasizing enjoyment, skills mastery, or a combination of the two. Finally, we asked them to identify the extent to which their school reading instruction emphasized remembering details, reacting, discussing reactions, and completing assignments or reports. We quantified the responses of all 195 subjects according to the scoring scale outlined in Figure 2.

After an initial meeting where we discussed scoring procedures and rubrics, we scored each

**FIGURE 2**  
Survey scoring rubric

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|---|---|
| <p><b>A. Summer reading activity</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>1—did no reading during the past summer</li><li>2—read only newspapers or magazines</li><li>3—were in the midst of reading a book</li><li>4—completed one book</li><li>5—read several books</li></ul>  | <p><b>B. Level of enjoyment associated with reading</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>1—associate no enjoyment with reading</li><li>2—associate little enjoyment with reading</li><li>3—lukewarm; reading is "OK" but they do not do it regularly; or "like reading" but did not engage in it over the summer</li><li>4—Like reading, engaged in it, but qualified the types and/or genres that they read</li><li>5—Enthusiastic readers; find reading enjoyable and rewarding and read regularly</li><li>6—Avid readers; tend to read widely in a variety of genres and topics</li></ul> |
| <p><b>C. Characteristics of school reading instruction</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>1—no emphasis</li><li>2—little emphasis</li><li>3—some emphasis</li><li>4—considerable emphasis</li><li>5—great deal of emphasis</li></ul>   | <p><b>D. Elementary school experiences with reading</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>1—negative</li><li>2—neutral</li><li>3—positive</li></ul>   |
| <p><b>E. Experiences at home with reading</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>1—different—home more negative than school</li><li>2—same—both home and school negative</li><li>3—same—both home and school neutral</li><li>4—same—both home and school positive</li><li>5—different—home more positive than school</li></ul> | <p><b>F. Favorite author</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>1—identified favorite author</li><li>2—did not identify favorite author</li></ul>  |

questionnaire independently. We calculated interrater reliability on the basis of the percentage of agreement on all questionnaire items for all subjects. The overall interrater reliability was 94.2%, a figure inflated by the ease with which several items could be scored. On the central issue of the subject's attitude toward reading, interrater reliability was 89.8%. In all cases differences in scoring were resolved by discussion.

## Characteristics of readers

The central issue in the Peter Effect is whether would-be teachers were engaged readers or not. In order to address that question, we collapsed the six categories of the level of enjoyment into two: enthusiastic and unenthusiastic readers.

### Enthusiastic readers

We classified as enthusiastic those who reported a positive attitude toward reading and who engaged in reading during the summer, whether that reading was selective or broad. We somewhat generously regarded enthusiasm as reading that extended beyond newspapers and magazines and included the completion of at least a single book (other than children's literature or textbooks assigned in a summer course).

Some of these readers reported enthusiasm only for particular types or genres, but those who exercised that preference were classified as enthusiastic. Finally, some respondents associated a high level of enjoyment with reading and engaged in a good deal of summer reading. We reserved our highest classification for those who reported a love of reading and read broadly and extensively over the summer.

### Unenthusiastic readers

We classified as unenthusiastic readers those respondents who associated no or very little enjoyment with reading and did little or no leisure reading over the previous summer. We regarded as lukewarm those readers who stated little enthusiasm for reading and did little summer reading. We also viewed as lukewarm those respondents who claimed to like or enjoy reading but did not take the time to read a single book over the course of the previous summer.

## Pilot study results

The results in Table 1 indicate that 54.3% of the 195 prospective teachers in the pilot study were classified as unenthusiastic about reading. Equally disconcerting was the small percentage of would-be teachers classified as having an unqualified

**TABLE 1**  
Pilot study results

	Unenthusiastic readers				Enthusiastic readers		Total
	No enjoyment of reading	Little enjoyment of reading	Lukewarm readers	Like some reading	Enjoy reading	Avid readers	
<b>Lower SAT</b> ( <i>N</i> = 76)	6	14	30	0	12	4	76
<b>percentage</b>	7.8	18.4	39.5	13.2	15.8	5.3	100
<b>Higher SAT</b> ( <i>N</i> = 119)	6	26	24	30	24	9	119
<b>percentage</b>	5.0	21.8	20.2	25.2	20.2	7.6	100
<b>Total</b> ( <i>N</i> = 195)	12	40	54	40	36	13	195
<b>Total percentage</b>	6.2	20.5	27.6	20.5	18.5	6.7	100
<b>Cumulative percentage</b>	6.2	26.7	54.3	74.8	93.3	100.0	

enjoyment of reading; presumably, they would be in the best position to share a love of reading with their future students. Only 25.2% of the respondents fell into this category.

We were not surprised to find that students from the higher SAT university included fewer unenthusiastic readers. Among the students in the lower SAT university, 65.8% were unenthusiastic, but 47.1% of the higher SAT students fell into the same category.

We did not find that any specific instructional emphases in reading, such as discussion or assignments, were related to a respondent's level of enjoyment. However, successful experiences in early elementary reading instruction were positively correlated to level of enjoyment of reading ( $r = .133$ ,  $p < .05$ ) as were positive home experiences ( $r = .180$ ,  $p < .001$ ). While both correlations are small, they suggest that a number of respondents were clearly affected by early experiences, a point that was confirmed by numerous comments from respondents.

## Follow-up study

There were several reasons why we believed that a follow-up study would be worthwhile. Not the least among these was the hope that the results of such a study would not be as grim as those that we found in the pilot. We deleted several items that did not contribute to the distinction between enthusiastic and unenthusiastic readers. Because numerous respondents distinguished their elementary from their high school experiences, we separated them in our inquiry as to instructional emphases. We attempted to directly assess the experiences of students whose teachers shared a love of reading with them. Finally, we included an item asking respondents to rate their college-level reading experiences as positive or negative. The survey instrument is included in Figure 3.

The subjects in the second study were 184 sophomores who had declared their intent to become elementary school teachers; they were drawn from the same two universities that had participated in the pilot study. There were 63 students from

**FIGURE 3**  
Follow-up study survey

### Reading survey

1. What reading did you do this past summer? Are there any titles or authors that you can recall? In general, what did you read for recreation?
2. When you think of yourself in general as a reader, how much enjoyment do you associate with reading? What reason(s) do you have for responding in this way?
3. When you consider the instruction in reading that you received in school, how would you rate the emphasis that was placed upon each of the following:

**Scale:**

1—no emphasis    2—little emphasis    3—some emphasis    4—considerable emphasis    5—great deal of emphasis

	Elementary school					High school				
Remembering the details of what you read	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Your own reaction to or interpretation of what you read	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Discussing your reactions and interpretations with classmates or teachers	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Completing assignments or reports associated with the reading	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
4. When you consider your early elementary school reading experiences with learning to read, do you recall them as primarily positive, negative, or neutral? Why?										
5. Did your experiences with reading at home differ from your experiences at school? If so, how?										
6. Were any of your teachers effective in sharing with you a love of reading? If so, how did they do this?										
7. When you consider your college level reading experiences, do you see them as primarily positive, negative, or neutral? Why?										

the lower SAT university and 121 from the higher SAT university. The survey was administered early in the semester as it had been in the pilot study. We used a variation on the same scoring rubric to address new items and classified all responses independently. The results are summarized in Table 2.

### Follow-up study results

The overall percentage of unenthusiastic readers declined to 48.4% in the follow-up study, a level that remained very disconcerting. We were startled to find that the marked difference in reading enthusiasm between lower SAT and higher SAT students that had characterized the pilot study had disappeared. In fact, more of the higher SAT students (48.8%) were classified as unenthusiastic than were their lower SAT counterparts (46.7%).

Finally, the correlation between college-level reading experiences and level of enjoyment in the follow-up study was significant ( $r = .313, p < .0001$ ), suggesting that college can provide both powerful and proximate experiences that can affect a student's perspectives on reading.

Over two years we surveyed a total of 379 pre-service teachers and found that 51.5% of the participants could be classified as unenthusiastic

readers. Of these, 57.6% came from the lower SAT university and 47.9% came from the higher SAT university. Thus it appears that a traditional measure of the level of academic preparedness of students seemed to have only a relatively small effect upon the reading attitudes of prospective teachers.

### Responses to open-ended questions

The responses to open-ended questions in both the pilot and follow-up studies displayed several patterns that we found particularly interesting because they consisted of spontaneous responses that the students in the study chose to share. It was clear that significant numbers of respondents were affected, either positively or negatively, by the instruction they received during their early school years. Forty-five students recalled their reading instruction as consisting of "reading dull books" and "doing book reports" or being taught by teachers who "did not make reading interesting." A further 61 students specifically recalled the struggles they experienced while learning to read, such as being placed in the lowest reading group, being labeled as learning disabled, or simply not getting the help that they needed. Of these, 21 students specified difficulties in reading comprehension, with many

**TABLE 2**  
Follow-up study results

	Unenthusiastic readers				Enthusiastic readers		Total
	No enjoyment of reading	Little enjoyment of reading	Lukewarm readers	Like some reading	Enjoy reading	Avid readers	
<b>Lower SAT university</b> (N = 63)	0	10	20	18	10	5	63
<b>Percentage</b>	0.0	15.9	31.7	28.6	15.9	7.9	100
<b>Higher SAT university</b> (N = 121)	4	10	45	27	28	7	121
<b>Percentage</b>	3.3	8.3	37.2	22.3	23.1	5.8	100
<b>Total</b> (N = 184)	4	20	65	45	38	12	184
<b>Total percentage</b>	2.2	10.9	35.3	24.5	20.6	6.5	100
<b>Cumulative percentage</b>	2.2	13.1	48.4	72.9	93.5	100.0	

still troubled in this area. On the positive side, 36 respondents recall regarding reading as “fun” in school, with “teachers sharing good books” and “choices for what we could read.” Twenty-six others mentioned the encouragement they received and the pride their teachers or parents took in their achievements.

One interesting finding was that the attitude toward reading of many teachers was relatively transparent to their students. Eighteen respondents noted that teachers’ attitudes toward reading were evident in their reading instruction. Unfortunately, 17 of the 18 identified that attitude as negative. On a more positive note, 22 students stated that their own attitudes toward reading had improved as a result of their college reading experiences, which suggests that it is possible to affect the reading habits and attitudes of college-age students.

## Implications

It appears to us that educators may find themselves in a largely recursive cycle of relationships. Research suggests that aesthetic and engaged reading is a positive trait that may be affected by the teacher and the instruction that the teacher provides. Because classroom instruction is largely driven by the beliefs of the teacher, it seems reasonable to conclude that some teachers will be unable to promote aesthetic reading through their instruction because they have had no experience with it. If teachers cannot effectively promote a love of reading, then the Peter Effect will propagate in many of their students and the cycle will remain unbroken.

We must note that it would be unfair to suggest that the large number of unenthusiastic readers we identified cannot or will not use “best practices” in their classrooms, including literature circles and book clubs. But it is entirely possible for efferent teachers to transform these techniques to conform more closely to their own beliefs about reading. For example, literature discussion participants can easily be given sets of questions to discuss that focus more on factual detail than on themes that draw children into literature. For this reason, it is vitally important that we identify and address teacher attitudes toward and beliefs about the nature of reading, particularly because our data suggest that early

negative reading experiences can have long-lasting, harmful effects on children.

Institutions that prepare teachers thus have a serious obligation to address the nature of their students’ attitudes toward reading. It would be tempting for the faculty in very selective institutions to exhibit confidence in the reading ability of their teacher education candidates. But it is not reading proficiency that distinguishes influential and non-influential teachers (Ruddell, 1995); it is the ability to “encourage children to enter into and transact with the text” (p. 461). If the teachers themselves do not experience this transaction, it is unlikely that they can effectively instruct their pupils to do it.

Practicing teachers must be aware that what they project to their students about reading truly matters. It would appear from our data that it will be difficult to hide from students any distaste for reading that teachers might feel. The long-lasting effects of early experiences reported by our respondents suggest that early success is of paramount importance to many children, particularly because early failures frequently evolve into permanent ones.

## Recommendations

1. Faculty in teacher preparation programs cannot assume that all of their students, even the most academically prepared, are enthusiastic readers. However, as our data suggest, well-planned instructional experiences may be quite successful in altering the views of reading held by many of their teacher candidates (Applegate & Applegate, in press).
2. School districts cannot assume that current teachers espouse an aesthetic view of reading. It seems reasonable to assume that many of the preservice teachers who were unenthusiastic readers have gone on to become inservice teachers. Our data suggest that it is not too late for schools to generate an enthusiasm for reading among their teachers. Indeed, several such programs have achieved a notable level of success in promoting teacher interest in reading (Cardarelli, 1992; Dreher, 2003; Flood & Lapp, 1994).
3. School districts that place a high premium on reader engagement and motivation may wish to



consider the reading engagement level of their teacher candidates as part of their teacher screening and selection process.

4. Teacher educators and teaching professionals across the United States must become articulate advocates for attention to motivation and aesthetic reading. Legislative initiatives often focus on more easily measured traits and can easily miss core motivators that may not be as easily observed.
5. Practicing teachers must remain sensitive to the fact that what they project to their students truly matters and it is unlikely that they will be able to mask their own attitude toward reading.
6. Parents need to be both vigilant observers of their children's reading behavior and role models of engaged reading. Good grades and high test scores are not a worthy substitute for a sense of reading engagement that can transform and expand a child's entire intellectual life.
7. Faculty in institutions that prepare teachers have a particular obligation to provide teacher candidates with experiences and models that will promote their own engagement in reading. We must examine our curricula and search for opportunities to demonstrate and share how engaged reading has affected our own lives.

### There may be a happy ending

In the final analysis, all students have a right to the chance to lose themselves in literature and thus to live a richer and more diverse life than they might have otherwise. For reasons that we may never entirely understand, some children choose not to pass through the door to that richer life and may always remain outside, despite their evident academic success. But others will encounter and follow teachers who are models and inspirations of literacy, and their lives will never be the same. The story of Peter and the beggar has a happy ending. Peter could not give the beggar money, but he gave him the ability to walk. If teachers remain open to the joys and rewards of engaged reading, they stand a much better chance of sharing that joy with their students. In doing so, they give them, like Peter gave the beggar, the ability to take themselves where they could not have gone before.

**Anthony Applegate teaches at Holy Family University (Grant and Frankford Avenues, Philadelphia, PA 19114, USA). E-mail [tapplegate@holyfamily.edu](mailto:tapplegate@holyfamily.edu). Mary Applegate teaches at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia.**

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A powerful agent is the right word. Whenever we come upon one of those intensely right words in a book or a newspaper the resulting effect is physical as well as spiritual, and electrically prompt.

Mark Twain

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