

Reconceiving teaching homiletics as play before work: revisiting Dykstra and Winnicott

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As a teacher of homiletics over the last few decades and as one who now listens to many a sermon seated as a congregant, I cannot help but think some Sundays about what I would say were the sermon I just heard be presented in a homiletics workshop. I often run the experience immediately after a service through what I call 'the K test'. That is, I turn to my wife, Kay, and ask '*Now, what was that sermon about?*' If Kay says something to the effect that '*I ... really couldn't tell you ...*', this confirms my suspicion that what we have experienced was not effective preaching if it was preaching at all!

I will come clean here. I do have several long held 'beefs' with many preachers, both novices, or those long in the tooth. And I'm not concerned here with those who resort to underhanded methods such as downright plagiarism or who lack concern with fidelity to author and text. These are faults of the devout with a high view of the importance of preaching. My gripes with the devout are as follows.

- Sermons that are read as full scripts.
- Sermons that are exegetical lectures about the text or the human author of the text.
- Sermons that lack focus or address no particular issue of human life or faith.

I know when I'm listening to one of these when...

- I find my mind easily drifting despite a sincere desire to listen.
- A contagion of dull apathy spreads across the surrounding congregation
- I could read almost any literature in front of me more easily than listen (or, in lockdown mode family members make coffee, complete jigsaws, or prefer to ride exercise bikes during the message).

This may well reflect my own lack of piety here. But I would suggest that this also reflects the method of sermon preparation employed by the preacher as much as my own impatience. If the opinion of friends is anything to go by, this sermonic event is not an uncommon phenomenon. It has to do with two things: on conceptual and the other pragmatic. These issues are ...

- a. What preachers think preaching is, both theologically and psychologically and
- b. How they have been taught to prepare their 'message'.

I only can focus upon the latter here.

We should not be surprised that this listening event in churches with a high view of Scripture sounds like listening to a reading of a devotional commentary, given the high stress on cognitive skills and the stress on essay writing in the majority of units required in theological degrees. The advent of teleprompters does not change this even if one doesn't detect the giveaway eyeball flicker. Hearing an essay read is a vastly different experience to being carried in thought through an effective sermon. When one is a participant in such a divine event then one certainly knows the difference. If the practice of preaching is simply the aural transfer of an evangelical Talmud, it is no wonder that such detailed texts are read verbatim. But this sacrifices listener involvement for expert comment. The people of God don't gather to watch one with special skills in downing hard books give a good-humoured report of their reading from the previous week but to engage with Jesus Christ.

Some writers over recent decades have tackled this head on and traced the over-reliance on commentary and read text to a fundamental lack of imagination or playfulness. I strongly affirm the views of Robert Dykstra in *Discovering a Sermon* (2001). In this insightful text Dykstra likens the discovery of a sermon through the lens of psychologist Donald Winnicott's 'Object Relations' theory.¹ Like the infant at play with its favourite toy, the sermon writer has to wrestle down and even destroy their toy or text before it becomes their own, beloved 'transitional' object. For Winnicott, how we play as infants, and how much space we are permitted by parental figures to engage in this space, affects our creativity and agency and confidence, even into adulthood. This leads Dykstra to advocate the putting aside the Bible commentary and authoritative voices until a later stage in sermon preparation lest, like the compliant and psychologically stilted infant whose play is interrupted by an interfering parent, the commentator become the dominant authority over the imagination and homiletic creativity of the preacher in preparation.

Dykstra also suggests that preaching is also parabolic. We need to so immerse ourselves in the dynamic of the story-world of the textual narrative, or the story-world of the apostolic community and their life situation so that we can identify parallel experiences, with a degree of curiosity about our own tensions in lived experience, of even mundane trivial experiences. Only after this sort of two-phase thinking can we say this message is our own for our own people. It must be imagined, pictured as an experience of our own before it can be shared as a unique and engaging preaching event for those we address. Countless other writers make similar claims.

But to come back to the central issue, I believe that many are taught and many of the popular preaching primers take an IKEA instruction manual approach in teaching novices how to preach. In some approaches I have noticed as a course moderator the homiletical method was virtually identical with the material the same students would have gained in an exegesis class. Main verbs and

¹ Especially note D Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, Routledge Classics, 2005

subordinate clauses are underlined, and important parsing noted. Then the students in subsequent modules are taught how to lighten up this doctrinal beast, attaching interesting flesh onto this skeleton in the form of illustrations, pithy proverbial quotes, applications, catchy 'advanced organizer' introduction especially involving a recent blockbuster movie, and an invitation to introspect in the conclusion and ... *voila!* A sermon is born! While this may be a pain free method and will produce a script that can be recited at the appropriate liturgical moment, there is something synthetic about the whole approach that seems to distance the listener from the whole person of the preacher let alone the Word of God. It produces holy speech that looks suspiciously like a sermon. But is it?

Dykstra is attempting to correct the fault that little scope is made in teaching the craft for discovery of the message from within the text, directly resulting in a loss of enthusiasm in the delivery. A low level of anticipation energy is pent up behind the delivery within the preacher. The message may contain safe and valid concepts within it, but many sound more like the wearied preacher is giving a report on their reading for the week, with contrived hand gestures attached, rather than a communication of hope the preacher cannot not wait to share. Self-discovery of truth precedes ownership of the message which in turn precedes rhetorical power to hold audience attention. And this is necessary if the hearers have space then to prayerfully internalise and respond to the truth within that message, that is, to worship.

Again, this invitation to imagine, to conceptualise an image of the message in its essence is not a skillset that theological education tends to develop. The so-called exegetical preaching approach tends to be hermeneutically biased toward grammatical issues and as a result decontextualises both the original message and the listener in a soon forgotten passing moment. As essential as the theological and exegetical work is to being able to 'rightly divide the word', and while this has a vital role to play in theological formation, the homiletic task does not end but begins there. I sometimes pose the question to homiletics classes as to whether if they read the sermon that they just prepared to themselves whether they would be blessed by its main message. This comes as a surprise to some showing they are thinking more about getting through the message 'unscathed' than being uplifted. Many attempt to dance around the issue on theological toes that blessing is the work of God not man or, that application is the work of the Spirit not the preacher. If a message has not warned their heart, odds are that it won't bless any who have to hear it. We need to do better than merely 'explain the meaning of ancient texts to the contemporary 'masses'.

Some preachers give themselves checklist to tick off when their script is produced. Is this orthodox? Is this Christ-centred? Was this good news? But as a process item this occurs too late in the preparation process and doesn't address whether the this draft text is a fresh discovery of light and hope. Similarly, requiring candidates to read or view exemplary sermons from preachers of does not change preparation habits in many. It is the habits that one falls back on in the preparation of the next

message that inhibits the craftwork of homiletic 'playfulness' right through to the actual moment of speech. Whether candidates are well versed in Buttrick's moves, or Lowry's loops, both synthetic formulae you notice, little of these pre-packaged approaches filter through in the long hours of preparation. There is no substitute for personal discovery if preacher enthusiasm is the goal.

The logic behind a whole brain process

I have used the following scheme as a suggestion for teaching those who are competent exegetes and often suspicious or fearful of their own limited imaginative capacities as a way of affirming both their high view of Scripture while also releasing their capacity to communicate empathically and engagingly. This is based on a few simple foundational concepts. It preserves space allocated to the accessing the linguistic and exegetical wisdom of the ages, but not in an interfering way that dominates the thinking of the preacher and their own discernment of the essence of the message. But if the sermon is truth unapologetically encased in personality, then the whole person, their memories, aspirations, imaginations and moral sympathies need to be integral to the preparation process, front of brain, not only clipped onto the finished product, or, left lying compliantly in the background. This process attempts to make space for much more of a whole brain approach through a deliberate switching of focus from one cognitive skillset to another.

This process may seem like handholding or overly programmatic. But it is a corrective to the ineffective approaches of springing from the text, relying on borrowed illustrative material or regurgitation of pre-digested commentaries².

- i. Each phase of production has only one horizon to which the preparer attends. The preacher throws themselves into this with no anxiety about the construction of some final text or looming sabbath. One task at a time sets up the phase to come. This peels apart disparate tasks that often blur the thinking of the preparer and result in a shapeless sermonic artifact.
- ii. Each phase ideally involves one sitting alone. If one cannot envisage six sittings in the available time, then attempt three 'supersets' of each line as a sitting divided evenly between two distinct exercises. Given that some will find either the work of creative production, or critical reflection more difficult than the other, the aim is to come with a refreshed mind to each 'workstation'.
- iii. At least half the sittings involve a switch from the dominance of so called cool logical 'left brain' thinking, the other sittings involve the warmer creative and empathic 'right brain' exercise of imagination of playfulness and expressing the preacher's own voice through the 'transitional object' of the sermon. It is critical to stress to the student that one has to

² Or even worse, the so called 'Preaching Commentary' series which outsources one's creative responsibilities altogether.

consciously be aware of what one is focussing upon in each sitting and why. Once one leaves a particular sitting or moves into the next workstation that this is a very different activity involving different cognitive 'muscle-groups'.

- iv. I stress again Winnicott's idea of the 'transitional object' here deliberately. As the imagination of the child takes the thumb, the rug or the soap container and turns it into an object that represents their own mother, an imaginary friend, a motorboat or truck, so the sermon does not 'exist' until it has taken on a life of its own, become a transitional object in the transitional space between imagination and reality through playful construction. This is the crux of the matter. There must be a moment in the preparation process where this is the object, in fact an inner world of images, upon which the preacher must focus and relate reflexively to what they themselves have made and internalised in their own minds eye. But then affects the immediate experience of those who then witness their sermonic craft.

The Process

This process is summarized in the diagram overleaf.

Sitting 1

As with Dykstra much of the freshness of a preacher happens here. This is the first critical thinking 'left brain' zone³ where the dominant thinking is based on careful observations. The features of the text itself governs the exercise rather than the imagination or transformations of the student. One's prior training in various criticisms helps in the detective work of assembling evidence here.

Alternately, one could take the position say of a Jerimiah who can question the moves of Yahweh, complains about the terms of trade, critiques the proposed demands, even take offence at what seems at the surface to be a scandalous suggestion⁴. But above all, the task is to observe the deliberate patterning, emphasis, or wordplays in their chosen pericope. This is akin to Winnicott's notion of the infant 'destroying the toy bear' for example, first prior to 'owning' the transitional object, namely the sacred text. At this point one may gain an illuminating glimpse what this message could well be addressing in their own and their hearers' lives. So, sitting one is the task of taking and dismantling the gift of this text so it can become our own. This bond with the text must occur prior to the next sitting and consultation with aids and authorities lest their word and their decisions override our own processes of observation and real affinity with this text. They may join in the play in the next sitting but not as a dominating parent who does the thinking and imagining for us.

Sitting 2

Here the sorts of skills that for many students usually take up the bulk of preparation time. But this is not just time spent sluffing through commentaries with no focussed purpose. From the outset the

³ I suggest here that this is a left-brain exercise even though it is not as 'scholastic' or intellectually stretching as the next it is based on observation alone, governed by the text with a minimum of creative transformation. But it could just as easily be a creative exercise as the element of joyful, childlike playfulness and discovery is not absent when the text is explored and appreciated for its own sake by those who love the Word of God.

⁴ See the article in this edition by Ch'ng and Malone as a rich example of a natural response to Yahweh's demand.

concern is to check whether one has indeed understood the text or if one through their own cultural distance is missing vital information that the original audience would have had at their fingertips. The preacher sets the terms of reference not the commentator. From the outset of this sitting one reads 'vicariously', with a view to the benefit of their future audience. The preparer only takes note what the general audience member would not normally notice from their own surface reading of the text. In this regard the preacher has to allow for the biblical literacy of their audience to make such a judgement. Those we aim to serve are moving to front of house in our minds, governing the shape of the final message from this early point rather than as an afterthought when the work shifts to dreaming up some 'applications'.

Figure 1. A Proposed Process of Focused Actions for Sermon Preparation

<p><i>Left Brain Work:</i> Observation Deduction Logical Analysis</p>	<p><i>Right Brain Work:</i> Creating Shaping Imagining</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Sitting #1: Dismantle the Text</i></p> <p>Observe patterns, repetitions, omissions, curiosities, faith tensions, non-sequiturs, shocks and scandalous statements.</p> <p>Find epochal statements, editor's 'finger prints', deliberate redactions, characterisations,</p> <p>Plot lines, reversals of fate/conversions, ironies</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Sitting #2: Study and Resolve</i></p> <p>Consult commentaries, journals about, ambiguities, background or literary distinctives.</p> <p>Take notes only of critical insights that the <i>listeners</i> would not generally possess</p> <p>Decide meanings, take a position.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Sitting #3: Go with the Flow: Tell the Story</i></p> <p>Using simple flowing prose, find your own voice</p> <p>Hear yourself in the vernacular.</p> <p>If flashes of parallel experiences come to you, write them directly into the flow.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Sitting #4: Observe the New Script</i></p> <p>Note patterns, repeatable phrases. Highlight new insights, connections and strong phrases.</p> <p>What one issue is this message really about?</p> <p>Condense as a 'story' in 3-5 simple sentences.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Sitting #5: Reset the Story</i></p> <p>'Retell' the condensed Story from #4 freely.</p> <p>Articulate Illustrations, entry points and landings</p> <p>Identify appropriate behavioural changes</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Sitting #6: Clarify and Rehearse</i></p> <p>Strengthen 'Transmission points' or rhetorical</p> <p>Produce working skeleton (1 A5 page).</p> <p>Test Drive privately, share the joy publicly.</p>

Sitting 3

I suspect that this is where I would differ from many who have taught homiletics in the same educational system. Many students I find in advanced classes have developed sermons the same way they were taught to develop essays. That is, they work out the points that they need to make and then fill in paragraphs under these. The points become the headings. If this occurs at this time you notice what happens. The headings of the commentators become the 'headings' of the lecture that follows with the occasional illustration to add a little light and shade. At this rate, the literate section of the congregation may do better to read the commentaries themselves. But here the role is to put away the notes one has taken. This is the critical turning point in the preparation process. This is where the sermon becomes a transitional object and takes on a life of its own. Now we in effect preach to ourselves but in our own 'vernacular' which is hopefully, also the language of the people of God we serve. Here, refreshed and in a distinctly new sitting our minds are not cluttered by a density of biblical theological facts, but only those critical ones that have remained with us. Usually what we cannot spontaneously recall surely is not that important to 'crack' the code of the particular passage.

This is then an exercise in creating a 'textorum', to borrow the phenomenologists tool of trade. For instance, it may help to close one's eyes and picture the church that is receiving the apostolic letter and the sorts of people who have said the hard things that the apostle now addresses, their life choices that they face. Or, we may imagine ourselves as the participant witness of the events within a biblical narrative unfolding before our informed imagination. And we imagine telling this in layperson-speak, pitching at no more than a year 10 vocabulary using a menu of similes and metaphors from the vernacular. In this one sitting we tell the story in freewriting of the text whether this be a parable, a narrated event, or any other genre of text.

This is based on the established theory that much thinking happens as we write and we form free associations, finding new sets of connections that mere left brain observation or study would not notice. We may even surface a better set of questions that the scholars may not have thought to address but which your own people may well have asked them. In class time it can be valuable to practice this together by playing a 'tag team' game, ransacking the inventory of our own senses as we imagine like amateur phenomenologists, the moods emotions and tactile phenomenon we would have experienced were we in the situation that salvation-history and weary preaching traditions have encrusted into the resin in which this text is framed down the ages.

Just as parallel expressions or vernacular metaphors should slide out onto our page effortlessly when we start chatting the story to imaginary others, we are simultaneously stimulating the same mental processes that will generate instances of similar situations, or interpersonal dynamics we have witnessed parallel to the text-world. These usually come without stress or solicitation. After all, we

ourselves and our audiences are made of the same fragile sinful stuff as the original hearers despite the cultural gulf in our life-worlds.

This must be pure and uninterrupted flow with at the most, the text of Scripture open before us as the prompter's script. This is a 'right-brain' indulgence that must become second nature if we are to ever to discover the message that blesses both parties. Curiously, I have noticed over the years the occasional homiletics student will notice that they really didn't see or grasp the full significance of the Biblical passage until they began to construct and observe the details of a parallel story that illustrated the human or godward experience they were aiming to relate. It simply is that they had the truth of the word stored in a different hemispherical cabinet to where they normally rely upon for ideas. It was an 'unthought known' now entering consciousness. At that point they also had the capacity to articulate this insight in a way that is natural to them. This is because in one sense they 'saw' their message rather than deduced it logically. They can automatically relay their message to others as it had become a personal experience of their own. But logical sharpening and setting of this insight comes second in sequence to apprehending it. Logic now shapes what the imagination has seen.

Sitting 4

There are usually some students who find this next step scandalous. But now the text we are really exegeting and observing is that 4 pages or so of our own free writing. That is the artefact upon which one focusses now. It bears a relationship to the original, the Biblical and the events that they recount. But we are focussed upon the transitional object that now has become real to us in the 'absence of the parent' documents. This is given our full attention and manipulated and transformed inside this secure playful space. Since this is a transitional object, one standing in for the Authorities from which it was constructed, means we treat it with the same analytical seriousness as those in sittings 1 and 2. As we once noticed patterns and striking features in sitting 1 within the text of scripture now the same left-brain critical activity begins to analyse the text of our own production. Somethings we will have said well. Other things are clunky or ambiguous and need pruning. We notice imbalances in the effort given to some aspects and come to realise that some parts of the story or the passage are at the heart of the issue and deserve greater airtime. Here is where familiarity with rhetorical principles is helpful, but formulaic approaches must not become dominant and interfere with the unique features of our new text. Each message has its own deep structure that will later be represented by a preferred external structure (Scott Wilson, 2014, 82).

This is where the hardest work happens for some resistant to scrupulous left brain thinking and decision making. This is where the form and shape of the message is decided and at least one parallel area of application to life and faith discerned. Sometimes, on a good day, we have an 'aha' moment and we really feel that we have captured the deep structure of the message that we must

preach at this mid-stage. There is a gem in the rough that shouts to be excised from our text and as adrenalin kicks in we bring that to the surface as the central homiletic issue. This message is about some-thing after all. By the end of this stage we should know and be able to tell anyone what this message will be about. The habit of sharing this 'fractal' of the message as an interconnected story or argument with friends and family⁵ is a helpful way of capturing and crafting the whole message in fractal form. These are not best conceived as points or headings. Heaven forbid! They are organically interconnected assertions like a developing argument, or suspense filled story. We are no longer concerned with what individual words we are going to say but how we are going to re-present it. This sitting guarantees that the final sermon will no longer be a talk about a text but a message from the text. In the foreground of our minds is a clear notion of what this sermon will assert.

Sitting 5

At this point we can now move back into the enjoyable task of right brain creativity. There should be no anxiety in this now. The preacher knows they left the fourth phase with a fresh, even an original, message about something important to fellow saints. Now taking and using this as our basic structure, like a friendly 'baby-sitter' rather than some dominating authority, we again write a free-flowing message that fleshes out and expounds this central story-like-structure, or argument and again changing this structure in the process. This is an exercise in 'intertextuality' (Scott Wilson, 2014). This will both draw down any remaining background information that is still in the front of brain from the second sitting and the observation of the critical statements or phrases upon which this message relies and trigger other 'texts' and discourses that are in the back of mind. We are intent at this stage to make sure that the structural divisions stand out in bold relief, using any appropriate rhetorical technique that seems to respect that content, whether parabolic resonance, assonance or some organic development of the ideas. Rather than, say as with Lowry all texts become the resolution of scandals, each sermon developed this way has its own unique shape and its own tensions that reflect the interpersonal dynamics in the original scriptural pericope from which it has crystallised.⁶

Sitting 6

This phase is now the construction of a brief one A4 or A5 page skeleton that captures and distils the text produced in sitting 5. But this is a necessary phase if our preaching is to take on that event like uniqueness that preacher and people intercommunicate and help co-construct. We dare not read such a message line by line as that simply shreds the artistry and craftwork of the previous phases. Many experienced homiletics students fear that preaching from a skeleton script fearing they will

⁵ This is the only real benefit I can see in Atkinson Roses' (1997) or McClures (2001) collaborative process of sermon production. Their ideas stem from ideological and philosophical positions. But they cut across the work and play that makes a sermon truly one's own creation. One cannot communicate someone else's imagination or conversion experience authentically.

⁶ Awareness of options like Lowry's loop or Robinson's main idea and so forth may have sensitised the student to the fact that such a condensed agenda can be employed but they must not become a strait jacket form that new transitional object is pressed into. Each transitional object is a unique and prayerful creation.

forget their words! This is overcome by the free writing exercise of sittings 3 and 5. That right-brain sitting is training ground for the final preaching from the artefact produced here. If the reason for those sittings is understood, then they should not even be thinking of forgetting their own words. When most humans have a vital life experience, they rarely struggle to decide how it should be told let alone get anxious about forgetting it. After a couple of airings (sittings 3 and 4), it will take on a durable shape. This yarn is then triggered in its entirety by the next retelling. In the telling it has become a present communicative event with its own life. Those that struggle to remember words are in fact, subverting their right brain practice through the left-brain attempt to memorize words literally. The nervous only need to think back to what images came to mind and those associations in space and time to recapture that vision, that insight. Ideas are gestalts, whole visions not separate words in some fragile DNA sequence. If we want to preach with less anxiety and more personal presence, to speak of our inner convictions to our circle of friends, we simply must, as Dykstra asserted, discover our *own* sermons. They must become our own playful creations which, when preached, become the transitional spaces into which we invite listeners to enter in and construct their own images. Memory failure to play, a failure of process, not a failure to recall.

A secondary issue to think through is what detail needs to be put down here to remind the individual of their own voice, their flow of ideas, so they can recall how they, moved from idea to idea, scene to scene. The preacher must know how to retain sufficient emotional pressure moving from one main idea to the next movement in their creative composition while acknowledging the rhetorical strategies of the scripture. Even if a great idea 'drops through the cracks' in our memory the engaged audience usually will not detect it since they will be watching a living performance of the word through an authentically enervated body rather than a detached impersonal reading of their research findings with hand gestures appended. The preacher then only needs take their skeleton into the pulpit with them and then only as mental insurance. If security and memory failure loom as larger fears it is a good practice in the hour before preaching to simply see if reading this skeleton they can test-drive their own prompts around the obstacle course of the premises in their argument from start to finish.

When through a process of three or six sittings, we have done our best to engage our whole brain, engaging the storage capacities and linkage across both hemispheres to play their part then what we are doing has an eschatological dimension. Though a prayerful sustained interaction between our life narrative, our training, our recollections and our predictions, and for evangelicals, our study of our text, we create a new object that is not the old object the text, but once was the text. But this is not an idol or a monstrous presumption. This humble sketchy skeletal guide has become a transitional object; not an object to worship, but one to worship through. It is a means by which we simultaneously interconnect with the world of the first witnesses of God's words and actions, accessed through the text of the scripture writers via their endorsed creativity, with our own original immersion and then our own contemporary reconstruction. This in turn, becomes the catalyst for the formation in the same

sequence of interconnected realities in the minds of our gathered flock; all events being orchestrated by the ever-present generous Spirit of Christ. The events of ages are compressed into this humble but curiously catalytic artefact once released from our souls to theirs through hearing, no less. I simply cannot conceive then, how the preacher who appreciates their instrumental role in this momentous communicative sequence can avoid a correspondingly sequential, deliberative and creative process in preparation of the very artefact from which God speaks afresh to his people in this present moment.

In conclusion

At the end of the day, we preachers must decide where our deepest ambitions lie. The form of our preaching determines what sort of homework we implicitly encourage our listeners to do. Do we want to send God's people out with the sort of homework to read more hard books or learn more Greek to be as learned as the preacher? I will grant that would be better than nothing. Or, do we also want their homework to be the offering of lives that pray, lives made conspicuously aware of the presence of that One who they have recognised and whose nudging they lookout for with renewed eyes? If this One so permits the pastor to have heard, seen and touched something of the divine realm in their minds eye in the study, then the genuine among the congregation are more likely to utilize the metaphors and images of the message and play with them into their own imaginations through their own Object Relating. Such preaching truly democratises the encounter with the ever-present Word. If we are to trigger such events catalytically as instruments of the light, this of necessity requires parallel preparatory processes that involve *both* hard-nosed cognitive work as well as strenuous uninterrupted play. This attempt here to devise this as a teaching process aligns with this endpoint rather than subverting it from the outset by focussing only on one faculty and not the whole brain and whole person. Given our present evangelical predilection for information about Christ rather than engagement with him, I would suggest we need to encourage our students to read less and play more.

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