

Rescuing Reading
VCCS English Peer Group Meeting 2006
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A two-year project funded by a VCCS Chancellor's Commonwealth Professorship, Rescuing Reading is a community college response to the report *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America* produced by the National Endowment for the Arts in 2004. This document summarizes key points presented to VCCS English faculty at the biennial peer group meeting in October 2006 at Williamsburg, Virginia.

Background

National Endowment for the Arts report, *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America* (2004)

- Results from the literature segment of the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, conducted by the Census Bureau in 2002 at the request of the National Endowment for the Arts.
- Survey investigated the percentage and number of adults, age 18 and over, who attended artistic performances, visited museums, watched broadcasts of arts programs, or read literature.
- Sample numbered more than 17,000 individuals.
- Extrapolates and interprets data on literary reading and compares them with results from similar surveys carried out in 1982 and 1992.
- "The survey asked respondents if, during the previous twelve months, they had read any novels, short stories, plays, or poetry in their leisure time (not for work or school). The report establishes trends in the number of adults reading, listening to, and writing literature by demographic categories of age, race, region, income, and education. This report also compares participation in literary activities with other leisure activities, such as watching movies and exercising." (*Reading at Risk*, "Executive Summary" ix)

Findings

1. **The percentage of adult Americans reading literature has dropped dramatically over the past 20 years.** ■ Less than half of the adult American population now reads literature. ■ The 10 percentage point decline in literary reading represents a loss of 20 million potential readers. ■ Only the strong growth in overall U.S. population of nearly 40 million adults from 1982 to 2002 allowed the actual number of readers to remain flat at 96 million.
2. **The decline in literary reading parallels a decline in total book reading.** ■ Total book reading is declining significantly, although not at the rate of literary reading. The percentage of the U.S. adult population reading any books has declined by -7 percent over the past decade.
3. **The rate of decline in literary reading is accelerating.** ■ The ten-year rate of decline has accelerated from -5 percent to -14 percent since 1992.
4. **Women read more literature than men do, but literary reading by both groups is declining at significant rates.** ■ Only slightly more than one-third of adult American males now read literature. ■ Reading among women is also declining significantly, but at a slower rate.
5. **Literary reading is declining among whites, African Americans, and Hispanics.**
6. **Literary reading is declining among all education levels.** ■ The higher the education level, the higher the reading rate, but reading among every group has declined over the past 20 years.
7. **Literary reading is declining among all age groups.**
8. **The steepest decline in literary reading is in the youngest age groups.** ■ Over the past 20 years, young adults (18-34) have declined from being those most likely to read literature to those least likely (with the exception of those age 65 and above). ■ The rate of decline for the youngest adults (18-24) is 55 percent greater than that of the total adult population (-28 percent vs. -18 percent).
9. **The decline in literary reading foreshadows an erosion in cultural and civic participation.** ■ Literary reading strongly correlates to other forms of active civic participation. ■ Literary readers are more likely than non-literary readers to perform volunteer and charity work, visit art museums, attend performing arts events, and attend sporting events. ■ Literary reading strongly correlates to other forms of active civic participation. ■ Literary readers are more likely than non-literary readers to perform volunteer and charity work, visit art museums, attend performing arts events, and attend sporting events.
10. **The decline in reading correlates with increased participation in a variety of electronic media, including the Internet, video games, and portable digital devices.** ■ Literature now competes with an enormous array of electronic media. While no single activity is responsible for the decline of reading, the cumulative presence and

availability of these alternatives have increasingly drawn Americans away from reading. ■ Non-readers watch more television than do readers. ■ In 1990, book buying constituted 5.7 percent of total recreation spending, while spending on audio, video, computers, and software was 6 percent. By 2002, electronic spending had soared to 24 percent, while spending on books declined slightly to 5.6 percent. ■ A 1999 study showed that the average American child lives in a household with 2.9 televisions, 1.8 VCRs, 3.1 radios, 2.1 CD players, 1.4 video game players, and 1 computer. (*Reading at Risk*, "Executive Summary" ix-xii)

[Progress Report Follows]

Rescuing Reading: A Community College Response to *Reading at Risk*
Chancellor's Commonwealth Professorship Project

Work Accomplished

Biannual Book Circles (Fall and Spring terms)

Web site: <http://www.tncc.edu/rescuingreading>

Subscribers Database

Weekly Reader (email newsletter)

“What They're Reading”

“Web Watch”

News to Use

Book Circles Promotion

Strategic Partnerships (Internal and external stakeholders)

President's Cultural Scholarships, SDV 100, English faculty (books they are assigning), foreign language faculty (Spring Book Circles Spanish selection), faculty across the college (extra credit suggestions), Catch

Someone Reading photography contest

Libraries and book stores

Newport News Libraries: The Big Read

Virginia Peninsula Literary Consortium

Work Remaining

Assessment Component

Symposium with High School and Community College Faculty

Study Groups

Readings by Writers

Problems Encountered

Institutional obstacles

Too-Many-Hats Syndrome

Tyranny of the Urgent

Discussion

How would you respond to this social critic, Hugo Münsterberg, an applied psychologist?

There may have been a time . . . when education had become ineffective through its formalism and rigidity. The children were forced by severe methods to do work repugnant to them. . . . A great reaction had to come. School-time was to be made a period of happiness, the child was to learn only what he liked, the college . . . [student] was to study only what seemed interesting. . . . It was a period in which the . . . [students] were no longer ordered, but begged and persuaded, . . . and in the school all, with the exception of the teachers, had a good time. But now in the zigzag movement of educational progress, a new countermovement seems imminent. . . . The youth left the school with a hundred things in their minds, but without any power of intellectual self-discipline. . . . Our public life reflects this lack everywhere. The newspapers and magazines, the theatres and the social-reform movements, are more and more made for a public which looks only to be entertained, and which has lost the power of sustained attention to that which is not attractive in itself . . . (*The Atlantic Monthly*, November 2006, 47-9)

This quotation is provided under the heading of *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* (The more we change, the more we stay the same). It was originally published in *The Atlantic* in 1909!

What follows is a transcript of the responses provided by the 21 participants who returned their response sheets. They were asked three questions:

1. **What do your students report concerning their reading habits and tastes?** [To which most reported anecdotal observations consistent with those quantified in Reading at Risk. There are also frequent notes of dismay with and even contempt for students' cultural values]
2. **What personal or academic obstacles to students' reading do you observe?** [To which many reported students' complex lives and weak academic and cognitive skills that make reading painful and difficult.]
3. **What institutional obstacles to reading-across-the-college do you observe?** [To which many reported the compartmentalization of reading within English courses and the dumbing-down of instruction in other courses requiring textbooks as well as lack of institutional support for general reading because of vocational and enrollment priorities.]

What do your students report concerning their reading habits and tastes?

- They hate to read. I teach developmental reading. We constantly discuss book. Each week I ask what they are reading. I do projects with them on reading habits. They are forced to read and therefore hate it. They say they don't have time. However, they watch television! These are topics of discussion in my classes.
- Bored, boring, tired, "Why?", "Can we go now?"
- Most confess that they don't like reading. Those who do read say they read magazines and trade publications. Most say watching a movie is far more informative than reading the book (of the movie).
- Generally, they read materials which are available on line.
- My students report that they rarely read as a leisure activity except to retrieve sports information. Their tastes center around anything sensationalized by the media, most specifically articles about self-beautification.
- Students rarely read for pleasure and, if they do read, usually read thrillers that are current best sellers.
- When the subject arises, they all seem to have been dipped, at least, in Stephen King. When I taught at Longwood in the late 60s, most of the women seemed to have read Emily and/or Charlotte Bronte. Now it is unusual to find one.
- They tend to read books such as *Harry Potter* or *Chronicles of Narnia*. Few of them read "classics" on their own, and when they are assigned readings, some of them take the easy way out by turning to SparkNotes. If they have problems understanding the plot within the first couple of pages, they give up and don't try to read the rest of the book.
- Sadly, there are students who do not read at all—who attempt to make passing grades without ever reading textbook material, let alone any "literary" reading. I was told recently that SOLs have almost obliterated discussion of literature in high schools—that there just isn't time.
- They like to be entertained. They enjoy reading about movie stars and they watch movies about books.
- Most of my developmental reading students do not read for pleasure. WE do literature circles in the developmental courses and many students say it's the first book they've ever read.
- In developmental classes (ENG 04-05) few like to read. They are typically coming fresh from high school. Also, in Northern Virginia most are non-native residents.
- Some profess to having read Stephen King and Edgar Allan Poe, but most admit to being non-readers. On the first day of class I ask students to list their favorite books and *Green Eggs and Ham* appears often. The Bible is often the only book listed, but I find they bring little evidence of much biblical knowledge.

- They don't enjoy it; they don't have the time; they think it's boring. If they do read, it's a short magazine article—on a popular celebrity—or a sports article.
- My students often report not liking to read; not all students but most. I ask students in all my classes to complete a questionnaire at the beginning of the semester that asks them about reading habits and preferences. Those who self-report liking reading frequently indicate a preference for magazines and online material—blogs, film reviews, news, etc.
- They “hate” to read and will do almost anything to avoid it. One student this semester innocently asked me, “Do you know if they have this novel in SparksNotes?” for our class novel, *And Then There Were None*.
- They are all over the place but, to some extent, fall into two groups: those who barely read at all and those who read constantly having fallen in love with books. Some focus mostly on literature and others on non-fiction. Some outread me as I spend so much of my reading time reading their papers about reading.
- They do not like reading books. They mostly read magazines.
- Don't like to read. Don't see the value of reading. Reading is either for learning or entertainment (not both at the same time). Don't read in first language.
- They are interested in fashion, talking on their cell phones, working. I'm actually uncertain whether they read anything at all, including newspapers and magazines. I have taught in the last three years several students who are actually reading their first books.
- Many of my students read what used to be referred to as “dime novels.” They pick up a book or two while shopping in WalMart to use to pass the time at work or at the kids' soccer practice.

What personal or academic obstacles to students' reading do you observe?

- Some are learning disabled. Most don't have adequate vocabulary. They aren't "good" readers—can't use context clues. They would choose to spend time otherwise. Can't find their ways to a library!!
- I observed students' personal issues such as family relations, economical problems and upbringing habits such as carelessness and irresponsibility all impede and slow down students' reading.
- Inability to focus. Not having cultivated the aspect of reading for pleasure. There are too many shortcuts to actual reading.
- Low reading levels and abilities.
- Most students today seem to find the ability to concentrate most difficult. They are consistently searching for a "right answer" on which they can place their finger and appear to be searching for entertainment rather than thought-provoking reading material.
- Students often work full time and have family obligations in addition to school work. Reading as a pastime seems an oddity.
- Working so many hours a week for money that they've scant time to do basic course work, much less read for personal interest—even assuming they wished to.
- Some students are pulled in several directions and have numerous responsibilities. School often tends to be on the bottom of their list of priorities. Therefore, reading a book is something they tend to put off, being the least important thing to do.
- Taking literature out of ENG 112 is a major mistake. With no reading in freshman year, the curriculum becomes just writing research papers, which, while certainly worthwhile and important, do not touch the imaginative realm of a student's knowledge.
- The attention span is decreasing significantly. Students feel bored if they are not entertained. They lack the motivation to find value in deeper reading and thoughts.
- It's hard work for my students to read. It is so much easier and faster to watch a movie or television show. I think many of the students struggle with the task of imagining characters, settings, etc.
- Personal obstacles with reading on their own, comprehension, critical thinking.
- Video games tend to dominate their life experiences.
- They're overloaded with responsibilities, hence little time to read. No books or value of books in the home (no support for reading). Some have little facility for reading with ease; it's a struggle, so they avoid it. Many

faculty and administrators assume reading isn't or shouldn't be an issue for our students. Few fun or interesting readings given to students to read for class.

- Leisure time and reading comprehension/vocabulary deficits. Many of my students work, attend college, and have family obligations. Time for reading doesn't make the priority list. I teach two developmental reading classes and these students struggle. They avoid reading because they have had associated academic failures and feel "stupid" when they don't know a majority of the words in a piece.
- They don't understand why they should have to read. Writing and math, they can see, but not reading.
- Lack of time but also lack of training in reading as well. I find this lack can be remedied fairly effectively over a short period of time. So what's going on over the previous years?
- Lack of the ability to concentrate for a sustained period of time seems to be an obstacle to students' reading. They are talkers, not necessarily readers or writers. Cell phone addictions are rampant.
- Very few reading skills in first language. Low priority for students. Lack fluency in reading. Don't see the connection between reading the development of all other skill areas.
- They seem caught up in the culture drama and therefore don't have enough time to do anything they want to do. Many of my students have had little reading experience in junior high and senior high and find nothing attractive about the idea. As far as personal lives are concerned they seem caught up in family drama. It seems to me a parent, cousin, sibling or distant relative is always sick or dying and they must serve those in pain, and haven't the time to even look in a book. Besides, video games are much more attractive. They think reading exists only for those of us who have no lives. That is a direct quote. Northern Virginia schools need to instill reading joys at a young age.
- Asking them to add reading to already crowded and over-crowded schedules seems so harsh. They just don't have the time.

What institutional obstacles to reading-across-the-college do you observe?

- Faculty not open to changing course structures. I do many activities to make my students aware of their reading habits. I would be happy to share my positive experiences with you. They come in hating to read but most leave my class with a different attitude.
- Some school systems side with students and their parents (for political reasons) and prevent serious teaching at schools. In colleges, it's not the case.
- Lack of reading courses that offer the incentive of credit for graduation. Need for intensive training for reading instructors.
- There is not an institutional climate that promotes reading, at least not an institution-wide emphasis on reading.
- Many of the academic divisions seem oblivious to the role of reading in their disciplines and many instructors seem reluctant to venture outside the realm of the textbook to teach their disciplines.
- Lack of enthusiasm on the part of faculty in other disciplines who are rigidly entrenched in their teaching methods and look upon change with disfavor.
- An excessive focus on our role as training rather than education; an assumption—always there at least unstated, and often stated—that college is to produce workers rather than to develop minds because a thoughtful person is a valuable end in itself, economic rationale notwithstanding.
- Students have problems with multi-tasking, so perhaps the faculty in other disciplines don't assign books because they assume they're reading in English and don't want to overload them.
- I think our institution is pro-reading-across-the-college. I think we all have so much work to do that sometimes promotion of reading takes a back seat to other things.
- All content areas need to require students to read the text. Unfortunately, in response to student distaste for reading, professors give the students the content in lecture format. Many students report getting Cs without reading the text.
- Outside of English classes, few teachers require readings beyond the textbook.
- Non-English faculty colleagues' strong resistance to teaching (or even modeling) anything that they think their students should already know how to do. Similarly, many of them feel that they don't have time to do anything besides "cover the material" in their classes.
- Cramming content as it is, 14 week semester.
- If anything, the high cost of textbooks seems to be leading to fewer rather than more books in classes.

- The institution doesn't care about such matters just numbers and parking. However, this is a faculty matter and we are not being demanding enough. In English composition too many see the "writing process" as somehow independent, as preceding reading (which is backwards).
- Because student reading levels are low, instructors deliver information via lectures and do not require much textbook reading.
- ESL courses are divided by skills. Often the writing in oral courses lacks substantial readings.
- The reading recommendations are sometimes very scholarly and unrealistic (and boring) for many students. They know analysis, argument, persuasion in "everyday life," but it seems so unrealistic in some readings.