

The "Decline" of Reading in America, Poverty and Access to Books, and the use of Comics in Encouraging Reading

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Teachers College Record, February, 2005

This paper is written as a response to these questions, posed by the editors of TC Record: Many newspapers across the country have run the following statistics: The 2002 census shows that literary reading is down 10.2% from the 1982 census, which equates to the loss of 20 million potential readers. Even more striking is the numbers reported for young adults. In 1982, 60% of young adults engaged in literary reading, while in 2002, only 43% do. Is this cause for alarm? If it is, what can be done to remedy this situation? Some educators have suggested using movies and graphic novels as a bridge to literary reading. But, is this an effective bridge; does bridging guarantee that students will take an interest in reading? Further, some have suggested that by offering some students graphic novels, while offering other students novels, we are undermining the nature of public education. But, is this missing the point? Do new media like graphic novels and film serve as an effective education tool in themselves; do they even have to be used as a bridge in order to have an educational benefit?

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Before addressing the issue of whether we should use movies and graphic novels to encourage reading, I first need to state that it is not at all clear that reading has declined in the US. The "decline" in reading literature was reported by Reading at Risk, published by the National Endowment for the Arts (Bradshaw and Nichols, 2002a). Reading at Risk only counted novels (in book form), poetry, and plays as literature, excluding magazines, on-line reading, and graphic novels. Also, data from earlier surveys suggests that the "decline" may not be stable: In 1945, 41% said they read literature, substantially less than the 1982 and 1992 results, and nearly identical to the Reading at Risk results (Link and Hopf, 1946). In addition, NEA reported, in another publication, that intellectual life in the US remains vigorous. There has been no change since 1982 in the percentage of people who do creative writing, attend plays, art, museums, and operas, and who use public libraries (Bradshaw and Nichols, 2002b).

There are, nevertheless, substantial numbers of children who do not read well. For the most part, these are children of poverty; the obvious cause of their reading problems is a lack of access to books.

Research shows that those who have more access to books read more, and those who read more read better. Children of poverty have little access to reading material at school: Schools in low-income neighborhoods have inferior classroom and school libraries (Duke, 2000; Neuman and Celano, 2001). They have less access to books at home (Feitelson and Goldstein, 1986), and they have less access to books in their communities: Public libraries in low-income areas are of inferior quality and are open less (Di Loreto and Tse, 1999; Neuman and Celano, 2001). The most important part of the cure for these children is improved school and public libraries, a suggestion supported by research showing a relationship between reading achievement and library quality (Lance, Welborn, and Hamilton-Pennell, 1993; Krashen, 1995; McQuillan, 1998; Lance, Hamilton-Pennell, Rodney, Petersen, and Sitter, 1999).

For the most part, "reluctant readers" are usually those with little access to books (Worthy and McKool, 1997). But even when books are available, there are, of course, some children who do not read (Pack, 2000). There is no current research that I know of on the use of graphic novels, but there is evidence suggesting that comic book reading can be a conduit to "heavier" reading. In our study, we found that middle school boys who read comic books read more in general than boys who did not read comics, read more books, and enjoyed reading more (Ujii and Krashen, 1996).

There are also compelling case histories of children who were reluctant readers until they discovered comics. Haugaard, (1973, p. 85) writes that her sons were "notoriously unmotivated to read and had to be urged, coaxed, cajoled, threatened and drilled in order even to stay in super slow group in reading" until they discovered comics.

She reports that her eldest son

...devoured what seemed to tons of the things ... The motivation these comics provided was absolutely phenomenal and a little bit frightening. My son would snatch up a new one and, with feverish and ravenous eyes, start gobbling it wherever he was - in the car on the way home from the market, in the middle of the yard, walking down the street, at the dinner table. All his senses seemed to shut down and he became a simple visual pipeline (Haugaard, 1973, p. 85).

Comic reading led to other reading. After a year or two, Haugaard's eldest son gave his collection away to his younger brother (who now "pores over the comic books lovingly"), and Haugaard noted that "he is far more interested now in reading Jules Verne and Ray Bradbury, books on electronics and science encyclopedias" (Haugaard, 1973, p. 85).

Several eminent writers and thinkers give comics the credit for helping them develop the competence for and interest in "heavier" reading. Among them is South Africa's Bishop Desmond Tutu:

One of the things that my father did was to let me read comics. I devoured all kinds of comics. People used to say, "That's bad because it spoils your English," but in fact, letting me read comics fed my love for English and my love for reading. I suppose if he had been firm I might not have developed this deep love for reading and for English ?" (Tutu, 2004).

For additional cases, see Krashen, 2004.

A popular criticism of comic book reading and of "light reading" in general is that children, once they start to do light reading, will never move on to more serious reading. Reassuring evidence comes from the case histories mentioned above as well as the finding that readers gradually expand their reading interests as they read more (LaBrant 1958).

What about movies? The concern that movie-going may inhibit reading has been around for a long time. Cleary (1939) reported that heavy movie goers, those who attended more than three films per week (5 percent of her sample) read more books and read higher quality books.

To summarize, although there is no evidence for an obvious decline in interest in reading in the United States, there are many children who do not read well. For the most part, these are children of poverty who have little access to books. The solution to their "reading problem" is straight-forward: improved school and public libraries. For those with access to books who are still "reluctant" readers, there is good reason to believe that comic book reading and other forms of light reading can serve as a conduit to "heavier" reading.

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