

READING HABITS AND PATTERNS OF ENTERING COLLEGE STUDENTS IN STANDARD AND COMPENSATORY CLASSES

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Virginia Commonwealth University has an open admissions policy and thus admits some students with marked difficulties in reading—particularly for the types of reading required for success in college. A course offered by the Division of Teacher Education, Reading and Study Skills (EDU 100), attracts many of these marginal students. Since I teach this course fairly regularly, I have become interested in the factors which operate in these students lives (and which have operated in the past) which may be presumed to have significance for their reading deficiencies.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the reading habits and patterns of students enrolled in the Reading and Study Skills course, certain demographic characteristics of the group, and to compare them with a group of students with adequate to above adequate reading ability (i.e., students enrolled in English 101, Composition and Rhetoric). Seventeen students in the Reading course and sixteen in the freshman English course were interviewed using an adaptation of an instrument designed by Duncan and Goggin (1981) for exploring the reading patterns of elderly readers. The students were interviewed individually and, in the case of the Reading students, responses were taped as well as written by the author. The noise conditions under which the English students were interviewed made taping impractical, so their comments were written only. The interviews took approximately twenty to twenty-five minutes and the Duncan and Goggin framework was not rigidly followed. That is, if the interview took an unexpected but apparently promising turn, the serendipity was exploited. New factors were identified in this way and questions relating to these factors were incorporated into subsequent interviews. Thus, while all students were asked a nucleus of questions, some students responded to additional inquiries. The interviews were held during October and November of this year. No statistical manipulations of the data were attempted. Rather, the study sought to highlight salient contrasts between the two groups which are hypothesized to relate to reading.

Demographic Characteristics

There were marked demographic contrasts between the two groups of students reflecting ethnic and, probably, social class differences (although SES data *per se* were not available).

The students in the English course were predominantly female, aged eighteen or nineteen, white and from outside the Richmond area. All but one were single and all but two had enrolled in college immediately following high school. All were full-time students, all were freshmen, and about two-thirds had no outside employment. Approximately two-thirds of these students planned to major in art or in art-related fields. Of the students in the Reading course, six were males. The students were older than their English course counterparts (about half of them were over nineteen) and about half of them had not proceeded to college directly from high school. Two-

thirds of the Reading course students were black and three-fourths of them were from the Richmond area, lived off campus, and all but four of the seventeen were working in addition to studying. These students were equally divided between freshmen and sophomores and included one junior. Two-thirds of these students planned to major in business or business-related subjects.

An interesting contrast between the groups emerged in the matter of career goals, with the English students demonstrating considerably greater specificity in this regard. Goals such as "theatre therapy, designing book covers, designing industrial interiors, medical illustration, editing a fashion magazine" were reported. The reading course students showed less clearly articulated goals. Responses such as the following were elicited: "To do better; to get a good job in sales; to be a business executive; to be in politics; to work in information systems;" although several responses were quite specific. It would appear that students in this course do not simply need help in reading. It would also seem likely that a good way to approach their reading instruction would be through materials exploring the world of work, particularly materials relating to the students' career choices.

Virtually all the students interviewed reported having avocations, usually several. About two-thirds of the English students had hobbies that were related to their career goals, while only one-eighth of the Reading students had hobbies related to their career aspirations. Thus, the English students reflected an integration of career and lifestyle, while work and recreation were apparently dichotomized by the Reading students. It is interesting, though somewhat disheartening to note that reading was named as a hobby by only five students.

Neither group was notably involved in organizations either on or off campus. Studies and jobs apparently had greater salience for these students at this point in their college careers.

During the course of interviewing, the matter of parental reading practices surfaced and from then on was included in subsequent interviews. In any extension of this study, it would be well to explore the students' perceptions of their parents as readers, but, on the basis of the fragmentary data gathered here, the English students were more likely to report that their parents were readers, that children's books had been available to them and that their parents had read to them when they were children.

Reading Patterns and Habits

Virtually all the students in both groups reported that they read now. But their comments about their reading differed. Students in the English course were apt to proffer the titles of favored books: *Steppenwolf*, *Forever Amber*, *The Invisible Man*, *The Women's Room*, and favorite authors: Gibran, Rand, Faulkner, Tolkien. In no case did the Reading students advance books or authors.

Responses to the second question relating to students' routines for reading displayed more similarity than disparity. More students in English, however, would be considered moderately heavy readers (reading more than two hours per day).

With regard to the variety of materials read, students in the education course were more likely to read the newspaper than were the English students, though this may have been an artifact of the study—the English students being dormitory dwellers without ready access to newspapers. Both groups of students are magazine readers. All but one of the English students reported reading magazines as did about half of the Reading students, but the latter were more likely to report themselves as "occasional" readers. Both groups cited magazines more frequently than other types of reading material. While there was some overlap between the magazines named as favorites (*Cosmopolitan*, *Ebony*, *Essence*, *Glamour*, *Newsweek* and *Time*), students in Reading cited *Black Collegian*, *Business Week*, *Richmond*, *Lifestyle*, and *Sports Illustrated*, while students

in English named *Biology Digest*, *Family Circle*, *Life*, *Mademoiselle*, and *Smithsonian*.

English students were more likely to read books and to mention specific titles. The Reading students, when asked if they read books, responded in terms of textbooks. The English students apparently didn't think of mentioning texts when asked about their reading.

Another dimension explored in the study was the consistency of reading interests over time. Differences between the groups in this aspect were not striking. Reading students divided about 50/50 on whether their reading interests had changed or remained constant. Of the English students, one-third reported that their interests were long-standing, while two-thirds reported changes. Changes were generally in a positive direction and reflected an increased desire to read as a pastime and an appreciation for the "meatier" materials of high school and college. When asked if their choice of career had affected their reading habits, only about half of the English students responded affirmatively, while three-fourths of the Reading students acknowledged the impact of career, e.g., "I certainly wouldn't read economics and accounting except for my career." The impact of college on these students' reading was less than happy according to their comments. "Boring courses like philosophy don't exactly motivate you to read." "College has made me read more, but like it less."

When asked to tell what they found valuable about reading, the English students responded with slightly more comments than did the Reading students, but their comments were more varied, more difficult to categorize and reflected a more individualistic perspective on reading. These students apparently marched to their own reading drummers. For both groups, reading for information was the most prevalent value cited (by almost half the students in each group). The value of broadening one's perspectives was the second most frequently named by both groups—a close second for the English students, a distant second for those in Reading.

When asked where they obtained their reading materials, the English students cited a wider variety of sources and were less likely to report difficulty in getting access to materials. The university library received several negative comments from both groups (one Reading student complained, it was "too quiet") but in general was found to be adequate.

The effect of the current price of reading materials was the next area explored. Of the 16 English students, seven said that cost was a factor, while only three of the reading students answered similarly. It is interesting to speculate as to why these students should find cost so negligible. Is it because they live at home and have access to parents' materials, or is it because they do little reading outside of the newspaper and assignments?

All of the reading students reported discussing their reading with other people at least sometimes and most of the English students did so, too. The Reading students were most likely to share with their families, than with friends and classmates. The English students (mostly living away from home) sought out their contemporaries (friends and classmates), but also cited family members as those with whom they shared their reading.

Similar responses were made by both groups with regard to physical obstacles to reading. Only two such problems surfaced: fatigue and visual difficulties and these were cited by a minority of both groups.

Most students did report that there were other barriers to their reading, however. For both groups, lack of time was the number one problem, but it was cited more frequently by the English students. The Reading students reported many more barriers to reading, including reading difficulties *per se* and problems with concentration. These were not mentioned by any of the English students.

Among the more interesting findings of this study were the

suggestions students made for facilitating their reading. Both groups requested more interesting assignments, more interesting lectures and an earlier start on required reading. The English students pleaded for multiple copies of books in the library and advocated *more* required reading in college. Their Reading course counterparts asked professors *not* to overload them with required reading, requested a quiet place for study and courses in reading improvement.

The responses of students in developmental reading reveal some disadvantages beyond the university's purview but there are several areas in which positive steps could be taken. Students with marginal reading skills should have reading instruction related to their career goals and in materials related to their required and major courses. They should be encouraged to devote a greater proportion of their time to reading and to go beyond the daily newspaper for pleasure reading. Care should be taken to indicate the relevance of required readings and to give some attention to students' interests where possible. Pleasurable aspects of reading should be highlighted. The practice of sharing reading was valued by the students and opportunities to do so should be built into their courses. It may never be that these students, entering college with marginal reading skills, will find the demands of college reading easy to meet, but it by no means appears that the university's effort is "too late." It should not be "too little."

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