Are They Reading or Not?

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ABSTRACT

There seems to be a myth that most teenagers do not read, when in fact they do read. Teenagers constantly read what is available to them through the different areas of technology that continues to evolve. The educators of today must first learn how to define the current reading of our modern world. The reality that text and library books are not the only source of reading must be accepted. Until reading by technology is factored into teenage reading statistics and reports, evidence that results in reduced reading during the teenage years will remain invalid. In order to achieve the overall picture of teenage reading habits, reading by using technology must be considered.
Keywords: **Teenagers, technology, reading**

Teens are accustomed to fast technology and instant gratification, so it is understandable that the younger generation does not always take time to sit down and enjoy a good old-fashioned book for pleasure. Students today are looking for instant answers, instant communication, and instant pleasure due to the technological advances of the cell phone, email, video games, and other conveniences available on the market today. Technology is not a bad thing. It is just change, and we, as a society of educators, must adapt to this ever-changing world in which our teenagers reside. There seems to be an overall myth among several of my colleagues that their students just do not read when, in fact, they do read, just not necessarily their textbooks or the dusty old-fashioned novels found in our local and school libraries.

During my high school years, I fondly recall spending my free time at the end of daily classes delving into the escapades of Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice,* or crying with Scarlett O'Hara in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind.* I find myself developing a faint smile as I think of all of the wonderful experiences shared with delightful literary characters during my high school years. I was hooked on reading and even

remember carrying a flashlight to bed to shine under the covers, lest I be caught awake after the strict lights-out policy instituted by my parents who firmly believed that sleep was important. I relish the memories of turning the pages and the familiar and comforting musty smell of the actual book in my possession. I wonder what the teenagers of today will remember about reading when they turn forty-five.

It finally occurred to me that even though my colleagues were complaining about the apathy of the local teenagers' responses and motivations to read, the students today are, in fact, very avid readers. They just don't read the way we did as teenagers. First, I realized that reading is not just reading a novel, textbook, or dusty library book. Our definition of reading needs refinement, and our mindset as teachers needs to align with the environment in which we currently live.

While researching the real meaning of teen reading today, I happened to come across a powerful example of why teachers perceive their students as apathetic readers. The government sponsored agency National Endowment for the Arts published a report, *To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence* in 2007. According to Nancy Kaplan, "in its second report on American reading practices, scholars took it to task for its failure to define what it means to read or examine online reading in systematic or detailed ways" (p. 194). If teachers are presented with information and statistics that omits the use of electronic sources as reading, then it stands to reason the overall opinion in my school is that our students do not read.

Technology has become the basis for our everyday lives in society. Therefore, technology has become the reflection of society in our schools. Our world is ever-changing and its inhabitants are embodied in that perpetual state of change. John McDaid (2007, para. 13) makes a valid point: "Electronic text marks a departure as radical as the change from orality to literacy. But truly investigating the new is nowhere near as easy as lamenting the decline of the status quo." Without including technology, the statistics surrounding our teen readers appear skewed at best. Mulitliteracies must be considered critical in assessing our students' literacy engagement. Over a decade ago, in the year 2000, Don Leu stated:

> Fifteen years ago, students did not need to know word processing technologies. Ten years ago, students did not need to know how to negotiate through the rich information environments possible in multimedia, CD-ROM technologies. Five years ago, students did not need to know how to search for information on the Internet, set a bookmark, use a web browser, create an HTML document, participate in a mailing list, engage in a collaborative Internet project with another classroom, or communicate via e-mail. Today, however, each of these technologies and each of these environments are appearing within classrooms forcing teachers, students, and researchers to continually adapt to new definitions of literacy. (759)

Limiting our view of literacy to just reading or writing in textbooks, novels, and the like is limiting the value of our students' abilities. As long as the entities evaluating our students' growth limit our accuracy in measurement of teen literacy, then our nation's school systems will continue to exhibit poor literacy statistics and teachers will buy into the myth. We must find a medium which will bridge society and literacy in schools. Tom Bean (1999), along with his

daughters, has identified the bottom-line of this problem. Quoted in Ruddell's *Teaching Content Reading & Writing* (2008, p. 8), Bean states, "Content teachers must move away from dependence on didactic, text-bound modes of teaching that place adolescents in passive roles. Recent research that includes adolescents' voices and views shows the sharp divide that exists between their lives outside school and inside school."

There are numerous articles that support the fact the even before the new millennium, educators and researchers were aware that technology would become a major factor surrounding the future of all reading. Eliza Dresang's book, *Radical Change: Books for Youth in a Digital Age,* was published in 1999. Dresang discusses the numerous ways that the books for teens were rapidly evolving and changing. Even as early as the previous decade, authors were gearing up for these changes by experimenting with different formats such as varied voices and multiple narrators, for example. Graphic novels, which are basically comics, became popular as well as Zines, which are written by teens for their contemporaries. In her book, Dresang (1999) states that some of these new formats came into popularity due "to kids' shortened attention spans and their comfort with graphics, making them receptive to gaining 'information from bits and bytes" (p. 21). Currently, literature is continuing to meet the evolving technological needs of readers.

Enhancing the reading experience and accepting the technological changes, as well as integrating new technology into students' lives, can be accomplished in numerous ways. Anita Beaman (2006), a librarian at Illinois State University's laboratory high school, discusses a few ideas to implement and embrace the current age of reading with students. Some of her ideas and observations include using the MySpace group for Teen Lit and connecting with authors who interact with their readers. Some authors maintain blogs, live journals, or willingly communicate with readers by email. Currently there are a number of authors who create playlists to go along with their works. Teens are engaged in music, and by using the iTunes tool to create specific playlists, authors can take the reading experience a step further. A couple of other examples of authors who post playlists on their websites are Lara M. Zeises (*Anyone But You; Bringing Up the Bones)* and Stephanie Meyer (*Twilight; New Moon).* Beaman feels that enhanced reading is the product of relationships that are formed between students, authors, and characters. It is much easier for today's student to communicate and connect with an author than it was in the past. The days of choosing a favorite author to write a letter to and send in a paper envelope with a stamp are gone.

Numerous suggestions are available for teachers who recognize the value of engaging students in technology for literacy purposes. Julieta Dias Fisher and Ann Hill, Library Media Specialists at Washington Township High School in Sewell, New Jersey, suggest using an Online Book Club. They recommend different ways to organize this type of group and other ideas to ensure success with this type of venture. Chapter A Day Book Club http://www.chapteraday.com/ is a company that daily sends out a five-minute segment of a book to subscribers and results in the reader completing a chapter or two by the end of each week. Programs such as this one reduce the overwhelming feeling that teens feel in this instant gratification age when looking at the inches thick old-fashioned novel. WebQuests are popular formats for classroom learning, as well as integrating paperless books using devices such as the Kindle. Wikis, games, and podcasts are also interesting to students. Kell (2009), suggests that based on personal experience, fan fiction fosters a creative and excellent learning environment. Fan fiction is a concept from popular culture that lends itself to reading and writing in a form that captures the attention of today's teens. Kell states that:

> Jenkins (2008) defines fan fiction as "original stories and novels which are set in the fictional universe of favorite television series, films, comics, games or other media properties" (para.1). Fan fiction generally involves writing stories with a combination of established characters and established "worlds" or settings with established histories of how the character normally interacts in its usual world or setting (Granick, n.d.). Fan fiction authors generally take one or a combination of these elements and write a story line that is different from what the original author produced. The fan fiction writer then posts his or her work on the Internet in specialized forums such as www.FanFiction.net. (p. 33)

There are unlimited ways to engage students in the reading process without using the old-fashioned novel. The ideas and suggestions are limitless. All a teacher has to do to accomplish this task is be open to change and willing to try.

Statistics support astounding changes in reading habits due to the Internet. Currently, Internet use is now a major source of reading materials. A 2003 survey of U.S. households by the Kaiser Family Foundation (2003) indicated that a majority of secondary students use the Internet for either research or enjoyment. Similarly, another survey by the Stanford Institute (2000) randomly sampled 4,000 U.S. households and once again found that the majority of respondents reported reading as a popular online activity. Reading is evidently an important online skill (McPherson, 2005).

The mindset of teachers today should be that reading is not just about books. Professor Linda W. Braun (2007), in her Simmons College Graduate School of Library and Information Science class in Boston, asks her students to research and find out what thirteen to eighteen-year-olds say about reading interests and preferences. The following reading was listed: text messages, email, MySpace/Facebook, Orchestra music, *Seventeen* magazine, iTunes, IMs, and specific Web sites. According to Braun, "While traditional forms of reading did appear in the logs, book-reading was almost always related to school assignments. The reading assignments listed included textbook reading as well as fiction reading assigned for a particular class." Braun feels that even though students will say that they don't like to read, they often times have an epiphany that they, in fact, do read a lot but don't like to read certain things in certain formats. "Students read via technology in order to find information, communicate with others, improve skills, and so on" (Braun, p.38). Students have to read to communicate on MySpace/Facebook and could it be possible that these Internet sites are comparable to the old-fashioned paper magazines that students of my generation favored? Teens have to be literate to read rules in online game play as well as the history of the game, ways to improve play, etc. They read and answer Blogs, and they must use reading and research skills to find and download music from iTunes. Actually, the importance of dialogue, an important skill taught in English classrooms, is reflected in the use of IM or text.

The next time the teachers in my school are discussing the dilemma of teen reading I will make the point of not judging our students' reading abilities based upon reading in the traditional means. Just because they are not pulling that wonderful musty-smelling copy of *Moby Dick* off of the library shelf or hiding under the covers with a flashlight attempting to finish one more chapter of *Gulliver's Travels* does not translate into the fact that our students do not read. We, as teachers, all have one ultimate goal in mind. We want our students to read. Is the medium from

which they read all that important? As soon as we realize that technology-based reading is here to stay, the sooner we will achieve our goal. Creating life-long readers is what it is all about.

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