

Reading for Pleasure

Learners' personal reading choices can provide teachers with ideas on how to motivate and support them

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After teaching and doing research in literacy programs, I wanted to know more about how literacy fit into women's lives, thinking that this could help me understand how better to serve women learners in programs. I conducted a lengthy qualitative study of 10 women learners for my doctoral dissertation. I wanted to find out if the women learners read outside of the program, what they wanted to read about, and what their purposes were for reading. I focus here on my interviews with four women and what their experiences suggest for curriculum and instruction in literacy programs.

Gloria, Donna, Lourdes, and Elizabeth were enrolled in a computer-assisted literacy program in a semi-rural area of Hawaii. Gloria and Donna were beginning adult basic education ABE students; Lourdes and Elizabeth, both ESOL students, were at slightly higher levels in the program. Donna was at the lowest level of literacy of the four women and rarely read. She told me she really wanted to read love stories but felt she couldn't. Her desire to read love stories was fueled by the romances and comedies she watched on TV, which she enjoyed and which distracted her from her family problems.

The women in the study all read and wanted to read popular culture materials that were not, for the most part, used in the literacy program they attended. They also used reading for similar ends: they read to make themselves feel better. I interviewed the women over the course of a year. I also observed them and interviewed staff in the program within this period. I discovered gaps between what the women read and wanted to read outside of the program and what the program offered.

In the literacy program, they learned basic keyboarding skills, English grammar, phonics, and oral pronunciation. Instruction in the program tended towards skills-based learning from commercial texts. The program used educational and diagnostic software and typing program tutorials. Library books and newspapers were brought into the tutoring instruction but were not central to the curriculum.

The Research

Each woman participated in five interviews between August, 1997, and May, 1998. The interviews concerned the women's literacy and learning in school, their work, families, and social networks, as well as their use of mass media.

Gloria, Lourdes, and Elizabeth did read outside of the literacy program. They read mainly for pleasure and to reduce tension, reading stories that nurtured them emotionally. The reading materials would, by most standards, be considered too difficult for their learning level. For example, Lourdes' ESOL level was between grades 4.5 and 6.5. She described what she learned from reading Gail Sheehy's *The Silent Passage*, a book that deeply affected her. Lourdes also said she read the Bible and small prayer books. She read these books regularly, and as needed, sometimes on a daily basis.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth, a 70-year-old naturalized Japanese woman, was a meat wrapper for most of her working years. She confided in me with both excitement and shame that she had gotten hooked on soap operas. She told me about the character development in these shows and that they helped her learn standard English. She also read books that had romantic storylines.

Reading and eating in conjunction with TV watching were important and ritualized for Elizabeth, who also read Japanese novels. She also read trade books. The *Joy Luck Club*, by Amy Tan, which helped with her English vocabulary and was stimulating to her. She also listened to tapes of this book.

Gloria

Gloria, a Hawaiian woman in her early 50s was worried about being able to pay her rent due to welfare cuts. She read the Bible every day and related to it as "a love letter" and a source of wisdom. She also listened to Bible tapes, used Bible software, discussed the Bible with her pastor and his wife, and used biblical resources to teach children in Sunday school. These activities invigorated her and distracted her from her worries. When she felt trapped by the welfare system, she sought spiritual materials for the direction and comfort they provided.

Lourdes

Lourdes, a naturalized Mexican mother was in her 50s. Now a health aide, she was married to a local man. When facing problems with co-workers and her husband, Lourdes read her prayer book and inspirational books. Oprah Winfrey and her guests, many of whom were authors, inspired her, and inspirational books gave her a sense of hope. These and other popular-culture books she read helped her to feel independent. As she described it, "The first book I read -- I'll never forget it. Was back in 19..., maybe 1981, was with Norman Vincent Peale, the positive thinker. Oh that book was good. So from then on I start you know, in my head I can do it. They interest me to go back to work and to be indep[endent] ... you know what I am now. Not to listen to my husband too much..." She carried books in her purse and consulted them when she had "the blues." She learned to use them as a shield from pain, using them for comfort:

The Theory

Cultural theories of reading for pleasure, including reading response theory (see Storey, Simonds, 1992; Radway, 1991; Fiske, 1989; Modleski, 1982), focus on the psychological readers receive from reading mass-produced materials, otherwise called "popular texts." reading is pleasurable because it can bring out the "melodramatic imagination" of women (Storey, p. 141). It provides "a terrain on which to dream" (Storey, p. 148) with fantasies that reflect and counter "the very real problems and tensions in women's lives" (Modleski, 1982). "Popular culture texts" or "genre literature" (self-help books, mysteries, romance novel literature, even the Bible) may be favored by casual readers over other "classical" literature ("great books") because they evoke readers' emotions and are not intimidating. John Fiske calls these texts "producerly" (p.103) because the story lines do not follow strict rules and have many "loose ends" and "gaps" that seduce readers to fill them in and produce new meanings that are themselves relevant to readers' lives, feelings, and cultures. This process is possible because the texts are open and accessible. Readers identify with strong and weak characters; the characters act out their problems in ways that readers understand and desire. The readers can imagine themselves as treasured heroines and feel emotionally strong.

Janice Radway (1991) studied 42 women romance readers, many of whom had some college education. She learned that the women often read romances when they were under stress, depressed or just to relax: it had tranquilizing effects. Reading these stories allowed them to relax and focus on their "personal needs, desires and pleasures." (p. 61). It also fulfilled their desire to be cared for by another person. The women knowingly read and reread the formulaic

a desired emotional experience, in part, as a "reversal of the oppression and emotional a suffered by women in real life" (p. 55).

Reader-response theory offers another way to understand the role of reading in women's asking not only about the meanings women receive from texts but also the feelings they reading. Reader-response theory provides an approach for understanding and building o reading interests and their imaginations.

Other research demonstrates how pleasure reading can be used in the classroom. Cho ar study (1994) found that women studying English who read romance novels felt that this increased their vocabularies and their interest in reading as it helped them learn English. Donna Earl, reported that students in a literacy program read more outside when she foc increasing their outside reading practices. She felt that providing learners with high-inte read materials is one factor in enabling learners to "learn to love reading" (1997, p. 1).

Lessons for Practice

Lourdes, Elizabeth, and Gloria turned to books for love, pleasure, and comfort. I think Donna would read for similar reasons, if she felt she could. These women related to books in ways that nourished them emotionally and reflected their life concerns and gender roles. They used electronic media, such as television, computers, and video, to supplement their pleasure reading. This reflects newer theories about electronic and print literacy technologies as intertwining and complex social activities: part of people's everyday social relations and identities, not divorced from public activities and institutions (see Brandt, 1990; Hemphill & Ianiro, 1995; Merrifield, 1997; Pattison, 1982; Tuman, 1992).

Asking about and then listening to women's struggles and problems allows you to see their interests and needs at different life stages and under particular circumstances. It also allows you to understand their coping strategies and the resources and people to which they turn. The process of describing themselves helps them to become the "experts" and assert more control over the curriculum (see, CCLOW, 1996; Imel & Kerka, 1997). The same process can assist teachers to create curriculum based on learners' changing needs.

Learners like Donna, who claim they want to read love stories but still feel embarrassed about their literacy levels, might be doubly embarrassed to "come out" and admit to literacy staff that they want to read these stories. Pleasure reading and inspirational books may appear frivolous and inconsequential to instructors. Yet these materials can motivate students to read because they reinforce emotional responsiveness between the reader and the text and relate to students' cultures (Rowland, 2000). These texts give students opportunities to practice reading without the pressure to "get it right." Teaching students to see reading as a tool for relaxation (see Horsman, 2000; Kortner, 1993) rather than a forced and difficult activity is important in creating in learners a desire to read.

Conclusion

Offering pleasure reading to a woman learner as one of many reading choices in a literacy program may make her feel that the program is an oasis rather than a tax on her energy. Offering pleasure reading that makes women feel good can "hook" women into reading because it is an enjoyable, emotionally stimulating practice. This type of reading can connect to women's emotional lives in a nonthreatening way and potentially turn reading a satisfying daily ritual.

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