

A STUDY OF THE EFFECTS OF AN EXTENSIVE APPROACH
TO THE TEACHING OF THE NOVEL ON THE ATTITUDES
OF GRADE 10 STUDENTS TO FICTION

by

JUDE COLLINS

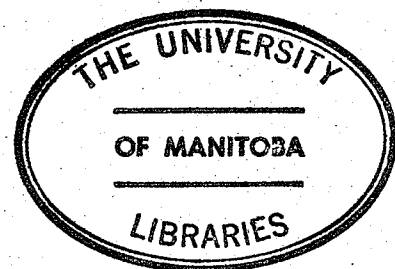
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of an extensive novel reading programme upon a Grade 10 class's attitude towards reading novels. Over a ten-week period students had access to a classroom collection of 111 titles. By the end of the programme, each student was required to have read a minimum of seven novels, and to have submitted a completed project--drawn from a list of thirty-five written, visual, and oral and dramatic activities--for six of these works.

The sample consisted of a class of Grade 10 students enrolled in either a Business Education or an Industrial high school programme. A total of twenty-two students--nineteen girls and three boys--were involved. Ability ranged from below to above average for students in a class of this nature.

Attitude change was measured using a twenty-five item coded inventory administered at the programme's commencement and again at its conclusion. Inventory items investigated subject attitude to reading in quantity, to discussion of reading, and to reading in terms of self and others, with considerable overlap between these headings.

When inventory results for the sample were analyzed using the Wilcoxon signed-rank method, the programme was

found to be highly significant in its effects on student attitude towards novel reading, to the .01 level. Findings also showed a marked growth in positive feelings by the sample towards reading large quantities of fiction, towards discussion of reading done, towards other people as "readers" and towards self-image as "readers."

Ancillary findings revealed that when drawing from the provided list of thirty-five activities, students explored fewer oral and dramatic projects than either written or visual kinds; but one oral and dramatic activity was the most popular single activity of all thirty-five offered. The sample showed similar self-restriction in choice of reading matter, with almost 50 percent of the available titles left unread by anyone, and two titles read by one half of the sample. More than three quarters of all reading selections were drawn from works of less than two hundred pages, and nine of the twelve most frequently read titles had duplicate or triplicate copies available.

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

The Problem

Statement of the Problem

Traditionally, the study of the novel has held a prominent position in the high school English curriculum. One major objective of such study has been development of the student's interest and understanding of the novel form. Despite this fact, surveys indicate that student and adult attitudes to the reading of fiction remain largely negative, in terms of amount read and time devoted to it.¹ This inquiry sought to establish the effects on student attitude, as measured by a questionnaire, of an extensive novel reading programme. This programme differed from the intensive in materials and methods.

Importance of the Problem

Considerable investigation has been conducted into the leisure reading habits of high school students, college students and adults in the United States. Findings indicate that even among the more educated sections of the population, read-

¹Crocker (1967); McElroy (1968); Gallup Poll (1958-69).

ing has a limited appeal.

Willett (1919)² reported that, of high school students surveyed, one third read no literature; Donohue (1947) placed the figure at 38 percent; and in 1967, 15 percent of high school students surveyed said they never read literature, and 75 percent had read five novels or less in the previous school year (Crocker, 1967).

At the college level, a 1950 study found that 40 percent of the men could not remember a title read in the previous six months (Jones, 1950). Clark (1956) reported that 36 percent of freshmen and 60 percent of senior students surveyed were "too busy" for leisure reading. Half of the college students surveyed by Logan devoted less than six hours per week to leisure reading (Logan, 1972).

Adult reading surveys reveal a similar pattern. Twenty percent of all the readers account for 70 percent of books read (Link and Hope, 1946). McElroy (1968) found that half of the adults sampled had not read a book in the previous six-month period. A 1963 National Opinion Research Center survey reported that 23 percent of those interviewed read neither magazines nor books regularly.³ A 1965 national sur-

² All research studies will be referred to in this manner throughout the thesis. Detailed information for each can be located in the Bibliography section (p. 111).

³ Quoted by Philip H. Ennis, Adult Book Reading in the United States: A Preliminary Report (Chicago: NORC, Univ. of Chicago, Sept. 1969), p. 47.

vey reported that the average American spends about 20 minutes a day with books and magazines and 30 minutes with his newspaper; and that 30 percent of all reading is done while doing something else.⁴

Equally detailed figures are not available for Canada, but public library membership figures seem to indicate a similar trend. In 1971, for example, the following percentages of the population were library members in the areas indicated: Saskatoon--50 percent; Ontario--33 percent; St. Boniface, Winnipeg--37 percent; Metropolitan Toronto--25 percent.⁵ There are no figures to indicate how many of these registered members do in fact use the libraries regularly, or what percentage of those who use them do so for purposes of novel reading. It seems reasonable to assume that the figure is considerably smaller.

Predictions regarding the future of books and book-reading--especially those embodied in the novel form itself--offer little hope that the current trend will be reversed.⁶

This study aimed to present the student with a pro-

⁴"How People Use Their Leisure," News Research Bulletin No. 2 (New York: American Newspaper Publishers Assn., 7 February 1968), p. 2.

⁵Saskatoon Public Library Annual Report, 1971; Ontario Library Review, Vol. 55, No. 4 (December 1971); St. Boniface Public Library Annual Report, 1971; Metropolitan Toronto Library Board, 1971.

⁶Aldous Huxley, Brave New World (London: Chatto & Windus, 1932); George Orwell, 1984 (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1949); Ray Bradbury, Fahrenheit 451 (London: Corgi, 1954); Sir Herbert Read, Vol. II, "Atrophied Muscles and Empty Art," The World in 1984, ed. Nigel Calder (Baltimore: Penguin, 1965).

gramme of fiction reading designed to deepen his understanding of and interest in the novel. As a result of reading pleasure experienced during the programme, it was hoped that students would develop more positive attitudes towards novel reading and in consequence more permanent reading habits.

Theoretical Framework

Distinguishing Elements of the Intensive Programme

The intensive study of the novel in high school is easily identifiable by four major characteristics: the type of novel selected for study, the number of such novels studied, the teaching method adopted, and the objectives receiving major emphasis.

The novel chosen for study tends to be a classic or one of established literary value. It is selected on the basis of its artistic worth and concern with mature adult problems and themes, rather than any inherent appeal it may hold for young people.

Typically, between two and four novels are dealt with in the course of a school year. This is a direct consequence of the teaching method employed.

Novels are studied in an intensive fashion. All members of the class study the same title at the same time, and major attention is paid to the work's artistic complexity and balance. Connections between life as presented in the novel and the student's experience of life receive less attention,

focus being on the world of art rather than the world of life.

The objective of such study is a deepening of the student's appreciation of the artistic skill and beauty found within the pages of the work under scrutiny. Familiarization of the student with a broad range of fiction or the promotion of independent reading habits are viewed as peripheral concerns.

The Function of Literature

Critical commentaries on the function of literature repeatedly highlight two elements that the intensive novel study programme de-emphasizes: the reader should discover in literature a source of enjoyment; and from it he should derive increased understanding of his own life.

In the sixteenth century, Sir Philip Sidney declared literature to be a moral and aesthetic instrument, the function of which was "to teach and delight,"⁷ presenting "so sweete a prospect into the way, as will intice any man to enter into it."⁸

Two centuries later Samuel Johnson argued that the best literature can "instruct by pleasing,"⁹ providing the

⁷Sir Philip Sidney, "An Apologie for Poetrie," The Great Critics, eds. J. H. Smith and E. W. Parks (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1951), p. 196.

⁸Ibid., p. 206.

⁹Samuel Johnson, "Preface to Shakespeare," The Great Critics, eds. J. H. Smith and E. W. Parks (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1951), p. 445.

reader with "just representations of general nature,"¹⁰ -- images of life in which he can see the lives of all men, including his own.

Nineteenth century critics stressed the importance of increased understanding. Shelley saw literature as "the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth,"¹¹ while Matthew Arnold believed that the writer "ought to know life and the world before dealing with them"¹² so that he might present his readers with a clear and honest picture of existence.

Many twentieth century commentators lay similar stress on the role of literature as an illuminator of the reader's life. I. A. Richards viewed literature as an artistic and meaningful organization of experience drawn from the flux of life;¹³ while T. S. Eliot showed similar concern with the connection between literature and life, pointing out that it is "the literature that we read for 'amusement,' or 'purely for pleasure' that may have the greatest, and least suspected

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Percy Bysshe Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry," The Great Critics, eds. J. H. Smith and E. W. Parks (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1951), p. 561.

¹² Matthew Arnold, "The Function of Criticism," The Great Critics, eds. J. H. Smith and E. W. Parks (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1951), p. 614.

¹³ I. A. Richards, "Science and Poetry," The Great Critics, eds. J. H. Smith and E. W. Parks (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1951), p. 757.

influence upon us."¹⁴

Modern critical commentary continues this concern with enjoyment and increased understanding of life, and frequently points to the importance of matching reading materials with the young person's present state of development in order to achieve these goals.

Northrop Frye warns against enforced adult taste. The student, he contends, must "feel values for himself," and danger lies in trying to by-pass an important stage in this evolutionary process.¹⁵

This view is shared by Robert Carlsen, who points out that, as in clothing, what is suitable for the adult is rarely suitable for the teen-ager.¹⁶

According to Dwight Burton, the teen-age novel serves a dual role--as a source of insights for the adolescent, and as a bridge to more mature reading.¹⁷

¹⁴T. S. Eliot, "Religion and Literature," The Great Critics, eds. J. H. Smith and E. W. Parks (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1951), p. 727.

¹⁵Quoted by Ben F. Nelms, "Reading for Pleasure in Junior High School," Literature for Adolescents, eds. Richard A. Meade and Robert C. Small, Jr. (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co., 1973), p. 223.

¹⁶Robert G. Carlsen, "For Everything There is a Season," Top of the News, Vol. 21, No. 2 (January, 1965), p. 110.

¹⁷Dwight L. Burton, "The Role of the Junior Novel: The Teacher's Stake," Literature for Adolescents, eds. Richard A. Meade and Robert C. Small, Jr. (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co., 1973), p. 213.

Burton's argument is echoed by Arthur Daigon, who stresses the need for increased breadth in student reading so that young people may better appreciate the wide-ranging province of the novel,¹⁸ while Robert Frost is concerned that students enjoy what they read, rather than analyze it.

Research Findings

Several studies have been conducted into the comparative effects of the intensive study of literature and wider or more individualized programmes. Findings point to considerable advantages when the more extensive method is employed.

It has been found that extensive reading of traditional literature increases student activity and discussion, that discussion is more often of questions considered of high value, and that both teachers and students experience an increased sense of satisfaction and achievement (Coryell, 1929).

Free reading programmes involving student self-selection of materials can result in an increase in the amount, variety and sophistication of student reading, and these gains can be maintained in adult life (LaBrant and Heller, 1939; LaBrant, 1961). Such programmes also show gains in reading comprehension (Norvell, 1950; Sauls, 1971).

¹⁸ Arthur Daigon, "Literature and the Schools," Literature for Adolescents, eds. Richard A. Meade and Robert C. Small, Jr. (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co., 1973), p. 213.

Both students and teachers express an enthusiasm for this approach to literature (Norvell, 1950; Fisk, 1961; Fink and Bogart, 1965); and its implementation is reported as having a positive effect on student attitude to literature (McNeil, 1966; Appleby, 1967; Sauls, 1971).

Limitations of the Study

There are a number of limitations which should be kept in mind when interpreting the findings of this study. The results pertain only to one group of Grade 10 General students, of whom the vast majority were girls, at St. John's High School, Winnipeg, April-June, 1974. The preponderance of girls in the group is not representative of Grade 10 classes in the school, but it was felt that this was counter-balanced by a representative range in ability and attitude to literature.

There are also limitations to the questionnaire form of testing employed. While more amenable to objective measurement, it does not provide the student with the opportunity for the kind of more developed response possible in an interview situation. The investigator is likewise limited, having no opportunity to assess attitude from tone of voice, gesture and other paralinguistic indicators. The amount of time available, combined with the investigator's limited skills in interviewing technique, made impossible this more detailed consideration of response.

Another limitation of the study arises from the reasons for student response to the questionnaire. Despite all efforts to avoid such an occurrence, some students may have responded in terms of their feelings towards the investigator, rather than towards novel reading, and may have used the questionnaire as an indirect method of expressing these feelings, whether positive or negative. While regrettable in terms of accurate programme assessment, this danger was seen as unavoidable.

The sustained nature of the programme, extending uninterrupted over ten weeks, is seen as holding the possibility of surfeit for normally reluctant readers. A more intermittent programme of extensive novel reading, occupying fewer days per week and extending over a longer time period, might have avoided this danger, but would in turn have increased the possibility that extraneous factors were responsible for recorded attitude change.

Finally, change in attitude cannot be attributed to any one single factor. As mentioned, the fact that the sample was composed of nineteen girls and three boys played a part. A different ratio of girls to boys might have produced different findings. Likewise, the particular titles available to students--and the number of duplicate or triplicate copies of individual works--influenced sample attitude. A similar but different range of titles might have changed the findings considerably. The related activities which students engaged

in formed a third possible source of attitude change. These activities, however, were seen as important aids to reflection on novels read by the students, and for this reason formed an important part of the programme. Thus three variables--the sample composition, the materials and the related activities--are involved in the shaping of attitude change and its interpretation.

Definitions

The following terms are defined in order to clarify their use in this study:

Attitude. "The predisposition or tendency to react specifically towards an object, situation or value; usually accompanied by feelings and emotions."¹⁹

Extensive reading. "(1) Wide reading covering much material. (2) Rapid reading for main thought rather than for detail or mechanics of expression."²⁰

Free reading. Wide reading with no restrictions on choice of reading materials.

Grade 10 General class. A tenth grade class composed

¹⁹C. V. Good, ed., Dictionary of Education (2nd ed.; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959), p. 49.

²⁰Ibid., p. 474.

of students enrolled in a Business Education or Industrial high school programme, and thus differentiated from those students intent on attending university after high school.

Intensive novel study programme. Study of a single adult or classic novel by all members of a high school class over a given period of time, with detailed attention paid to the novel's aesthetic qualities and with student work predominantly written and of a literary critical nature.

Teen-age novel. A novel which, by subject matter and/or treatment, appears to hold a ready appeal for teenagers. For this study, the term will be used to include several biographical works with a narrative structure.

Organization of Remainder of Thesis

The rest of the thesis has been organized in the following way: Chapter II reviews the literature related to the problem. Chapter III provides information about the sample, the method of procedure and evaluative instruments employed. Chapter IV presents the data and data analysis. Chapter V outlines the findings and conclusions.

Chapter II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Critical Theory

Since the time of Plato, critics have sought to establish the value of literature, what benefits it can confer, and what place it has in the affairs of men. The following review considers briefly the opinions of five prominent commentators in the twentieth century. From these some implications regarding desirable objectives for the teaching of literature may be gathered.

For I. A. Richards, a literary experience is to be judged by the same criteria as any other experience. This involves assessing "the degree to which the mind, through this experience, attains a complete equilibrium"¹--an equilibrium in which as much as possible of the person is engaged. Literature is the record of such moments, "full of life and free from conflict."² The reader, through contact with the work in question, can share the writer's dynamic, ordered

¹I. A. Richards, "Science and Poetry," The Great Critics (3rd ed., eds. J. H. Smith and E. W. Parks; New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1951), p. 746.

²Ibid., p. 748.