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ENGL101 FC04

12 December 2014

### Reading Still Matters

Throughout high school, I babysat the same twin girls very frequently. When I first started babysitting, we would partake in normal activities for the typical six-year-old girls; Candyland, bracelet-making and coloring were always on our agenda. When Shayna and Maya grew tired of all of our fun-filled activities, they always asked, “Can we read a book?” I always found this inquiry interesting. The girls never asked to go upstairs and get ready for bed; they asked for me to read to them because they associated being read to with going to sleep. I recently babysat for another family that also had two girls. However, these girls were a bit younger than Shayna and Maya. When their bedtime grew closer, the girls asked me if they could go upstairs and play on their iPads. This request made me analyze the generational progression that we are currently experiencing. I noticed that children these days are more consumed with technology than learning and practicing the classic skill of reading.

In this paper, I will examine the benefits of reading. I will analyze why people have ignored the importance of reading and how to once again attain a society in which Americans read every day, not only for the purpose of seeking information, but also for pleasure. I will argue that Americans should read more, simply to set an example for the future participants in American democracy (children) and achieve a well-informed public.

According to Common Sense Media, “reading for fun drops off dramatically as children get older, and rates among all children--especially teens—have fallen precipitously in recent years” (Rideout 5). I don’t think there is any denying that children and teens in this era just do not read anywhere near as frequently as the children and teens of past generations. This has been proven by many governmental reading agencies, including the National Center for Education Statistics. The proportion that says they “never” or “hardly ever” read has gone from 8% of 13-year-olds and 9% of 17-year-olds in 1984 to 22% and 27% respectively today (Rooney et al np). This is a problem on a variety of levels. If Americans continue this trend and remain apathetic about reading, we will set a terrible example for the children who will eventually lead the country in politics and decision-making. We are letting children pass critical periods for reading by allowing them to play on their iPads instead of reading the elementary works of Eric Carle or even Dr. Seuss.

Primarily, it is important to establish why reading plays such an essential role in the lives of Americans. To put it simply, we read because we want to know more about subjects, people or events. Reading is integral to our understanding of the world. As the reading rates in America continue to decline, we will soon lack “not only the skilled workers needed for an information-based economy, but also the informed voters crucial democracy” (Clemmit 170). If we refrain from reading as much as we should, let alone at all, we are taking our access to literature and education for granted.

For many Americans, the decline in readership results in attaining less knowledge about the world or how to understand people or situations. For young children, reading is integral to learn at a young age. They must read in order to develop necessary cognitive

skills such as “phonological awareness,” “rapid naming” and “oral reading fluency” (Bergen et al 2). The *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology* defines phonological awareness as the ability to recognize written speech sounds and produce them orally. Rapid naming refers to children’s abilities to identify concepts in a rather quick nature (for example, seeing a row of colors and listing off which colors they are). Oral reading fluency just refers to the fundamental capability to read out loud in an articulate and coherent manner (Bergen et al 2). Clearly, these skills are very important for Americans of any age to possess; however, there is a certain critical period in a child’s life in which he or she can best learn these skills. A critical period is “a maturational time period during which some crucial experience will have its peak effect on development or learning” (Newport 737). If children do not read regularly within their early years of life, they may struggle to develop literacy later in life.

Additionally, reading is an essential practice because it teaches audiences ways of understanding others. At least in novels, the reading experience is very interesting because it is the job of the reader to use his or her imagination to make sense of a character. Because we are not given concrete evidence of what a character looks like, their voice or their general personality, we are subject to personally make these inferences, which requires a great deal of brain power. Novelists tend to “make readers work harder in order to understand the characters” (Toppo 1) and as a result, readers understand real people in their lives much better.

During my freshman year of high school, we were assigned to read the classic play, *A Raisin in The Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry. This play highlights the lives of African American family members during the Civil Rights Movement. At one point

during the play, Beneatha, the daughter figure in the family, expresses her anger for her brother, Walter, because he lost a great deal of the family's money after investing in a liquor store. Beneatha screams at her mother out of her anger toward Walter and says that there is nothing left of him to love. Her mother delivers a very famous speech after Beneatha's tirade. She elucidates that the time to "love somebody the most" is after they have done something wrong and feel like the whole world is against them (Hansberry 113). From reading this play, I learned the valuable lesson that no matter how much I might want to yell at someone or tell them how angry I am because of something they did, I instead sympathize with them. Although I might be angry, I forgive them because sometimes you just have to sacrifice ego for love. Had I not read this play, I would have never learned this profound lesson.

I have explained the fact that reading rates have declined and expressed the reasons why reading is crucial to our everyday lives, however, it is vital to understand exactly why reading is not the most common pastime anymore. Though a problem is usually attributed to being caused by a variety of factors, I would like to focus the cause of the decline of American literacy directly toward the technological revolution that is the second millennium. In other words, cell phones, social media, iPads...the whole lot is distracting Americans from reading as much as they should. This trend is most prevalent among children. Because of the transition into a strictly-digital age, "many of the children now attending preschool and the early years of primary education have grown up in homes where multimedia, multi-modal forms of expression are common and their experiences of using digital technologies for communicative and creative purposes can be extensive" (McPake et al 2). Though computer games, iPads and kindles appeal to kids

because of their interactivity, the learning experiences they offer are very different from the classic custom of reading (Schorr 2). While I agree that iPads are great sources of entertainment for children since they offer movies, games and even educational learning programs, they cannot exist as a substitute for reading books. As stated previously, reading helps the mind understand how other people think. Although reading is performed independently, the lessons that one may extract from books help in social situations. Conversely, the social experience in regards to technology usage is very limited. Technology is sometimes even thought to “impede these children’s social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development” (Armstrong and Casement np). When a child plays with his iPad for hours, he misses out on the opportunity to gain social skills, whereas if he read, he might learn about social practices through the plot of even his children’s book.

Although technology seems to get in the way of Americans’ reading experiences, many would argue that e-reading is the perfect balance between reading and using technology. In her article, “E-books Have Great Benefits for Academic and Research Libraries,” Sue Polanka talks about the benefits of using a tablet or an e-reader to download books. Polanka, as well as many other technological gurus in today’s world, argue, “there is no physical space required for e-books” (Polanka np). While I agree with the fact that e-books are more convenient than physical bound books, Polanka also makes the case that with e-readers, “the fear of loss or damage to content also diminishes” (np). Polanka’s exposition is justifiable in the physical sense; e-books do not over time lose their pages or become unreadable due to years of wear and tear. However, in a more abstract sense, the content is damaged because its readers do not as fully absorb it when it

is published in an e-book. Reading on a tablet is much more distracting than reading a physical book. In a print book, there is nothing that could possibly stray a reader away from the words on the pages. There are no other usages of print books besides gauging meaning and reason out of a novel's plot. When reading an e-book, however, there are countless other applications by which one could become distracted. A man might sit down with his iPad with the intentions of finishing a novel he started reading months ago. He might read a few pages, lose track of what he is reading, then open a new application on the device such as Facebook, Twitter or virtually anything besides the task on which he was principally intending to focus. Reading electronically encourages "quick, surface-skimming over sustained concentration, to the potential detriment of learning" (Clemmit 172). Although e-reading seems convenient, this reading medium is not nearly as effective as reading a print book, simply because there are no distracting alternative uses of print books besides reading.

Additionally, David A. Bell, author of *A Bookless Future*, explains how the internet and e-reading facilitate research. He highlights a specific example in this respect: a college professor is sitting in a coffee shop writing a conference paper. A passage from a book the professor read years ago comes to mind, but he can't exactly remember the precise wording. As a result, he searches for the passage in a common search engine and finds it immediately. In previous years, this professor would have had to spend hours in a library tracking down the book, the page number and eventually, the exact passage. Bell goes on to explain that technology has made research much easier over the years. While I do agree that search engines and keyword locator applications on e-readers are quite useful and easy, I also must side with John Donatich, author of *Book Still Matter in a*

*Digital Age*. Donatich believes that searching for quotes and passages via the internet or even search options on e-readers facilitates the research experience. However, he counters that by elucidating that a reader or researcher may at the same time “read things out of a deliberate context and sequence.” Donatich contends that the traditional way of research tests our abilities to seek information, face challenges and put our minds to work. I agree with Donatich rather than Bell on this issue: research is a necessary skill that everyone should be competent in performing.

Some critics may also counter the point that technology disrupts the mind from developing efficiently due to Americans’ lack of reading by introducing the point that America is smoothly transitioning into an exclusively digital age in which children must grow up using technology. According to the *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, the use of iPads alone benefits children beyond measure. Because the device enables children to exercise their sense of touch, it benefits greatly in the long-run. Though reading may shape a child’s cognitive abilities, touch permits children to “[experience] texture, shape, weight [and contributes] to learners’ classification skills” (Crescenzi et al 86). The *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy* says that even non-educational games on iPads provide an excellent foundation for motor development and coordination. Although playing on iPads can enhance motor development, there are many activities that have the same purpose and do not interfere with reading books. These activities can include playing sports, learning how to ride a bike and basically any other physical activities.

In order to solve the issue that technology seems to be more important to Americans than reading, parent should read to their children every night. To many

Americans, the act of parents reading to their own children seems like a cultural norm. However, researchers from Harvard Medical School have found that fewer than half of American parents with children under three years of age actually read aloud to their kids (Bernstein and Lesperance 1). As a child, my parents insisted that we read at least one book every night. This conditioned me to want to read every night as an independent reader. I also grew up in a home in which I always saw my parent curled up on the couch reading. This set a great example for me because I behaviorally learned that reading is just a thing people do. Seeing my parents with different books in their hands every week made me want to go through books just as quickly. If American parents began to value reading more, children would learn by their parents' actions and develop a desire for literacy. When children see their parents watching Netflix on their iPads, they want to do the same thing. Children learn by example, so shouldn't parents want to at least set their children up for success by establishing an academic environment in the home?

In essence, reading is extremely beneficial toward human growth and development. Reading builds the fundamentals of human literacy, informs audiences about important concepts we must use in order to establish an informed public and helps us understand how other people think. Although these skills are extremely necessary, reading rates have declined throughout the years. One of the main causes for this atrophy can be directly targeted at the rise of technology that has occurred over the past few decades. Since children are growing up in homes in which technology is valued more than reading, children may know how to operate tablets at two years old, but have no motivation to learn to read in order to operate these devices more resourcefully. If we fail to read, we fail to solve the drop in literacy. We fail to acknowledge that reading educates



people, and if we want to attain an educated society, people must read. In order to ensure that children read, parents must read as well. Children should come downstairs in the morning and see their parents reading the daily newspaper in order to show their children that they glorify the daily practice of learning new information by reading. Parents should read to their kids early on so that children have something to work for as they grow up: the ability to read more and more independently. If reading continues to die, Americans will eventually become uninformed about historical events and world affairs. We cannot live in a world in which people suddenly stop trying to educate themselves.