

JCLL

Volume 36, 2010

For the Love of Reading: Students' Patronage and Perceptions of a Reading Room at One University

Marilyn J. Bossmann and Patricia Houston
University of Cincinnati

Dawn-Marie Kelly
Northern Kentucky University

How does easy access to a comfortable, quiet room stocked with high-interest fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and drama impact the reading habits of transitional college students? Does such a space encourage students to spend free time reading for pleasure? Does access to books and encouragement from reading role models promote extended reading for pleasure? In an attempt to answer these questions, the authors conducted a survey during one academic year at a Midwest university, collecting information about self-selected reading habits and attitudes from students who used the reading room. This article reports students' patronage and perceptions of this room, and in turn, offers practical suggestions to other universities that may want to create a similar space.

An urban Midwestern university created a space on campus designed to promote reading and provide students access to a relaxed environment where they can select, borrow, and read books for pleasure. This unique room is available to students, faculty, staff, and administrators alike, and is housed in the building where students spend much of their academic day. This space supports a diverse gathering of readers by enabling students to develop "an eagerness, an intensity to read about topics that stimulate their reading curiosity" (Morley, 1996, p. 130) in a setting that fosters a love of books and allows students "to exert ownership and choose the literature they will read" (Atwell, 1987, p. 161).

Housed in the Center for Access and Transition (CAT), The CAT Reading Room (CRR) was established at an urban university campus in 2006. The CAT is "an academic unit designed to provide academic instruction and advising for undergraduate students who did not meet the criteria for direct admission to a university baccalaureate program" ("About the Center for Access and Transition," 2008, p.1). The CRR, funded through a private grant, is a "textbook-free zone" and is centrally located for use by students. It provides easy access to a wide variety of books; with such access, students are more likely to read for pleasure.

The mission of the CRR is to provide

an atmosphere free from the pressures of a study skills approach to college developmental reading and to encourage "reading for the sake of reading" (Paulson, 2006, p. 55-56).

Additionally, the intimate atmosphere in the CRR supports the notion of a community of readers that engages in various self-selected reading activities. Two distinctive features of the CRR are that most of its fiction, nonfiction, poetry, drama, and books-on-tape have been donated by faculty and friends of the CRR, and faculty volunteers supervise the space. Another hallmark of the CRR is its quarterly "authors' series," which invites local, regional, and national writers and university faculty to read and discuss their

work; as a result, many students read visiting authors' books.

The purpose of this article is to explore students' patronage and perceptions of the CRR and their own self-selected reading, in order to offer practical suggestions to other universities that may want to create a similar space. To achieve this goal, we surveyed an ethnically diverse group of eighteen students who had an association with CRR activities by, for example, checking out books or attending a CRR class function or a special event. A thorough review of survey results prompted us to share our insights into students' reading habits, attitudes, and the major themes that emerged.

What Does the Literature Say?

For the past thirty years, sustained silent reading (SSR) has been used widely and effectively in reading classes across all grade levels, but rarely has it been implemented and documented in college reading courses. As a result, little research exists on the SSR strategy and its effectiveness with adult learners. However, what research does exist supports the use of SSR with adults. Salter and Brooke (2007) note that "students are most likely to read as a leisure activity when engaged in an academic setting and less likely to read outside that environment. There are several reasons why this may be true including exposure to a wealth of leisure reading material readily available in the academic setting" (p. 27). Besides ease and variety of reading materials, students need to have convenient access to materials in a rich print environment in proximity to where they attend school and study. Also, if underprepared college students are to develop a life-long love of reading and effective strategies for understanding academic texts, students must be provided with ample opportunity to engage in self-selected reading for enjoyment.

It appears that another important step is to build a reading culture by providing students, faculty, and others a

comfortable, quiet, and easily-accessible reading and lending room (Krashen, 2004; Paulson, 2006). In addition, Valeri-Gold (1995) emphasizes that engaging in self-selected reading positively influences students' attitudes toward reading. She found that participants in her study of college developmental learners overwhelmingly reported that "they enjoyed having class time to read in a relaxed and quiet environment" (p. 386). Further evidence from the U.S. National Endowment for the Arts' *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America* (2004) reports that among young adults literary reading has declined more rapidly than in other adult age groups (p. xi).

McCracken (1971) also supports the incorporation of students' sustained reading into any classroom: "SSR...may supplant some part of each student's existing school program, but it is more effective when it becomes a part of each teacher's program" (p. 521). According to Jeanne Henry (1995), creator of the Reading Workshop college curriculum, students can learn to enjoy reading for its own sake only if they are given ample time to read books they have chosen. Henry states, "[T]hey settle into the most beautiful silence on earth, that of students engrossed in their reading" (1995, p. xv). As a result, Henry reports that students' ability to construct meaning from academic texts improves, thereby increasing their academic success (Henry, 1995, p. xv).

In addition to this evidence, Dawn, a co-author of this article, shares similar experiences. In 2008, she taught Reading Workshop at a local university and required students to spend a large amount of class time engaged in self-selected silent reading for enjoyment. According to Dawn's observations, students came to the first class "hating" reading and were convinced they were bad readers. However, at the semester's end, 90 percent of students admitted feeling more confident, more positive about the process of reading and their ability to derive meaning from various texts. Most

students reported that having control over text selection, time spent with each text, and being able to demonstrate their abilities to analyze, synthesize, and respond to texts were the main reasons for positive changes in their reading habits. Interestingly, Dawn discovered that these students reported an increased confidence when approaching academic texts because, during Reading Workshop, students were able to gather meaning from selected books.

While Dawn's findings are anecdotal, her experiences support the notion that by providing students with a quiet, relaxed setting and access to books, students' attitudes toward reading and their desire to read are positively influenced.

A growing body of research indicates that encouraging students to self-select and read for pleasure is a fundamental step in moving students ever closer to the goal of becoming life-long readers. Unfortunately, as developmental readers head to college, many find their reading instruction consists of worksheets to aid in comprehension and report writing. In order for students to achieve overall success in reading, they must practice key elements, including reading for enjoyment and leisure with the support of teachers as models. It is apparent that SSR has value. First, it promotes a like or love of reading. Secondly, it encourages students to engage in reading for pleasure. Thirdly, it moves students toward higher levels of understanding themselves and the subjects about which they read.

The Survey and What It Revealed

Faced with questions concerning the use of the CRR by its students and curious to learn about self-selected reading characteristics and reading patterns, we conducted a study during the 2006 – 2007 academic year. Our study was driven by our desire to learn more about students' reading habits, book selections, attitudes toward reading and what, if anything, these readers did to extend and develop their experiences and habits. Additionally, we wanted to

discover if providing a quiet space stocked with high-interest reading material would encourage readers to spend more time reading for pleasure.

We constructed a comprehensive survey of 21 closed and open-ended questions, which allowed students to provide information related to their reading habits, book selections, reading attitudes, and extended reading experiences (see Appendix A). Some questions evoked more than one response. The survey attempted to elicit information about current as well as past reading practices; it was distributed during the regular academic day and at special events sponsored by the CRR, such as author visits.

At the end of the study, we collected and reviewed the survey responses, which revealed these three themes: reading habits, choices in types of reading, and attitudes toward reading. We tabulated the responses to each question within a given theme and set out to discover the meaning behind what the students revealed.

Theme One: Established Reading Habits

The first theme we reviewed revealed information about students' reading habits—how many self-selected books they read, how much time they engaged in or wished to engage in self-selected reading, and what, if any, follow-up activities they chose. Results showed that students spent an average of 53 minutes each day engaged in reading for enjoyment. Also, a solid 95% indicated they would like to spend more time or the same amount of time on reading (see Table B1 in Appendix B). We noted that 61% stated they chose another book with a similar theme or one by the same author, while 28% of the students indicated they explored other texts with the same theme as books previously read. In addition, 61% of the students reported that they recommended favorite books to their friends, which suggests that sharing reading experiences has a social influence. Most students participated in a

combination of these follow-up activities.

Theme Two: Choices in Types of Reading

The second theme we examined, which showed the characteristics of self-selected reading choices made by the students, may serve as a guide when considering programs and book purchases for universities. The answers to survey question 9 ("What kinds of books do you like to read?") indicated a readership involved in a wide range of reading genres (see Table B3 in Appendix B). Students also reported that they read more books than the previous year, and those extra books had all been checked out from the CRR. Interestingly, 39% stated they chose books to read for enjoyment that had been recommended by friends (see Table B4 in Appendix B), which may indicate that universities should promote paired reading experiences among students' social groups.

Theme Three: Attitudes toward Reading

The third theme revealed important information about students' attitudes toward reading. The information we gathered showed that 90% of students said they either liked reading (e.g., "I enjoy the accomplishment of finishing a good book"), or they loved reading (e.g., "Reading is sacred" and "I love reading...it takes me to another place"). Encouragingly, 95% considered themselves "good" readers (survey question 16).

Further Insights We Gained

In addition to these key themes, our survey results revealed insights into self-selected reading, such as students wanting to find unique stories and provocative books about world issues. Also, students believed that reading is precious in a democracy, and they admitted that reading had been a favorite childhood pastime (survey question 21). Students defined the following achievements as a result of engaging in self-selected reading: discovering new books, reading more than they had in high school, reading a

book in two days, and not reading the last chapter halfway through a book (survey question 18). One student commented that meeting authors in the CRR after readings had a positive impact on her overall feelings about reading.

Additionally, students reported barriers to reading for pleasure, which included lack of time, distractions such as media accessibility, attention issues, school commitments, and motivation.

However, the biggest obstacle reported by students was a lack of access to books. Yet, when noting what motivated students to become self-select readers (survey question 22), some respondents reported "reading things I liked; *Harry Potter*; volunteering with children; my teachers encouraged me to read; my mother and father were always reading; we had a lot of books at home; wanting to know more about different topics." These responses appear to indicate that many students have a solid foundation in reading for pleasure.

While our students' responses underscore the importance of providing access to books so students can read for pleasure, we also noted mixed responses to the following survey question: "Do you believe that the single most important factor in determining the success of a self-selecting reading program for students is a teacher's or a family member's attitude toward reading?" Out of 18 students, 11 agreed that the single most important factor in determining the success of a self-selected reading program for students is a teacher's or family member's attitude toward reading (e.g., "College teachers provided good role models;" "My mother reads all the time, like every day;" "My sister really enjoys books. She sometimes spends days on end reading novels"). Interestingly, three students indicated that access to books at home or school was as important as the influence of a teacher's or family member's attitude toward reading (e.g., "While my family and teachers didn't force me to read, they made it possible by having reading materials available").

Conclusions

Our goal in surveying students was to gain insights into students' reading habits, reading choices, reading attitudes, and extended reading activities to discover if providing a relaxing place stocked with books would encourage them to spend more time reading for pleasure. And in fact, the CRR's design does support self-selected reading. However, while our results show that the CRR or a similar setting encourages reading for pleasure, we also cannot ignore those students who indicate they draw on personal experiences, especially a family member or a teacher who serves as a role model, in the development of their reading habits and skills. Our results support recognition of the importance of role models who promote reading for pleasure at a designated time in the classroom (Krashen, 2004; McCracken & McCracken, 1978).

Students report very positive attitudes toward self-selected reading and that reading is an activity they enjoy and want to extend in their lives. Students engage in reading a variety of books, information that any university can use as a guide for purchasing and making requests for book donations. Reading interesting selections does promote extended reading. In addition, a student's interest in an author, information about the subject matter, and personal recommendations are key when choosing a book. Our survey responses concur with Krashen (2004) and his finding that "reading itself promotes reading" (p. 81).

Suggestions for Institutions Wanting to Create a Reading Room

Our hope is that most universities will promote reading for pleasure. We support Paulson's (2006) invaluable notion that "[s]elf-selected reading for enjoyment, with all its implementation challenges, is the key to the goal of creating life-long readers at the college level" (p. 56). A love of reading may promote academic success and create a foundation for developing life-long

reading habits as well. The need for universities to build such a foundation is a pressing one, especially for today's transitional college students. Based on our survey results, we are convinced that universities can provide spaces similar to the CRR to help build such a foundation. Chamblee (1993-1994) notes, "As students are encouraged to bring themselves to their reading, to feel and think about the author's ideas...they begin to see reading as less threatening. The more they read and respond, the more fluent their reading becomes...They start to take control of their own learning" (pp. 277-278). University spaces designed like the CRR may provide students with opportunities to engage in self-selected reading and can provide students with a comfortable and relaxing environment where they can read for pleasure.

As educators who encourage our college community to engage in daily self-selected reading for enjoyment, we recommend the following:

- (a) that more professors make SSR part of their classes, thereby modeling the value of reading and validating reading habits, and thus encouraging students to be readers and to feel like readers;
- (b) that professors hold classes in CRR-like spaces, thereby promoting a reading culture that stresses the importance of reading and emphasizes a variety of book genres in relation to greater access to reading;
- (c) that faculty, administration, and staff across university campuses hold book talks in order to share what they, as role models, are reading; in turn, faculty can encourage students to gather ideas and then plan and share their own book talks in class, in relation to their early involvement with reading and their positive attitudes toward reading;
- (d) that universities consider supporting an author series by collaborating with other departments to recognize diverse cultures and genres of

reading.

Finally, we believe more research needs to be conducted on the efficacy of facilitating spaces like the CRR, on strengthening the connections between reading for pleasure, and on increasing reading for academic performance and achievement. Ultimately, our goal is to create a community of readers; we argue that our students' survey responses demonstrate that by so doing, attitudes toward reading improve, as do reading habits. As a result, we believe that spaces like the CRR can help students, especially transitional students, develop a love of reading for its own sake, and that when students love reading, they create a foundation upon which they can build their academic success.

References

- About the Center for Access and Transition (2008, August). *UC Achieves: Center for Access and Transition* 7, 1.
- Atwell, N. (1987). *In the Middle: Writing, Reading, and Learning with Adolescents*. Portsmouth: Boyton/Cook.
- Chamblee, C. (1993-1994). Reader response in the college reading class. *Forum for Reading*, 24, 43-54.
- Henry, J. (1995). *If Not Now: Developmental Readers in the College Classroom*. Portsmouth: Boyton/Cook.
- Krashen, S. D. (2004). *The Power of Reading: Insights from the Research*. (2nd ed). Westport, CT and Portsmouth, NH: Libraries Unlimited, Heinemann.
- McCracken, R. & McCracken, M. (1978). Modeling is the key to sustained silent reading. *Reading Teacher*, 31, 406-408.
- McCracken, R. A. (1971). Initiating sustained silent reading. *Journal of Reading*, 14 (8), 521-524.
- Morley, S. (1996). Faculty book talks: Adults sharing books and enthusiasm

- for reading with students. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 40(2), 130. Retrieved from <http://www.ebsco.com>.
- Paulson, E. (2006). Self-selected reading for enjoyment as a college developmental reading approach. *Journal of College Reading and Learning*, 36(2), 51-58.
- Salter, A. & Brook, J. (2007). Are we becoming an aliterate society? The demand for recreational reading among undergraduates at two universities. *College and Undergraduate Universities*, 14(3), 27-43.
- U. S. National Endowment for the Arts. (2004). *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America*. Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts.
- <http://purl.access.gpo.gov/GPO/LPS54850>.
- Valeri-Gold, M. (1995). Uninterrupted sustained silent reading is an effective authentic method for college developmental learners. *Journal of Reading*, 38(5), 385-386.

APPENDIX A: CRR Survey Questions

Please answer the following questions. Thank you for participating in this survey.

Reading Habits

1. How many self-selected books have you read in the last year?
2. How many days per week do you make self-selected reading a part of your daily routine?
3. How many minutes per day are utilized for self-selected reading in your day?
4. Would you like to spend more, less or the same amount of time that you are spending on self-selected reading?
 more time less time the same amount of time (circle one)
5. Compared to last year, are you spending more, less or the same amount of time on self-selected reading?
 more time less time the same amount of time (circle one)
6. Do you use self-selected reading at any specific time(s) during the day? When?
7. From the list below, please circle the types of reading follow up activities you may be involved in, as they relate to your self-selected reading:
 - no follow up activities
 - writing in a journal or log
 - completing a book report
 - choosing another book by the same author
 - choosing another book with a similar theme
 - exploring information about the book's theme
 - exploring information about the author
 - suggesting a friend read the book
 - other follow up activity_____
8. How would you describe the self-selected reading habits of members in your family at home?

Types of Reading

9. What kind of books do you like to read?
10. How do you choose a good book to read?
11. How many books have you checked out and read from the CRR, this year?
12. Why did you choose these titles?
13. What has been your favorite selection from the CRR?
14. Why is this book your favorite?

Attitudes toward Reading

15. What is your attitude toward reading?
 16. Do you feel that you are a good reader?
 17. What was a major accomplishment in your self-selected CRR reading experience?
 18. What are some barriers to your using self-selected reading?
 19. How many years has self-selected reading been a part of your reading history?
 20. What motivated you to become a self-selected reader?
 21. Do you believe that the single most important factor in determining the success of a self-selected reading program for students is your teacher's or a family member's attitude toward reading? Why or why not?
-

APPENDIX B: CRR Survey Responses

Table B1

Survey Question 4: Would you like to spend more, less, or the same amount of time that you are now spending on self-selected reading?

Time students would like to spend on reading	Number of students out of 18	Percentage of students
More time	14	78%
Less time	1	5%
Same Amount of Time	3	17%

Table B2

Survey Question 7: Please circle the types of reading follow-up activities you may be involved in, as they related to your self-selected reading.

Follow-up activities	Number of students out of 18	Percentage of students
Writing in a journal or log	3	17%
Completing a book report	5	28%
Choosing another book by the same author	11	61%
Choosing another book with a similar theme	11	61%
Exploring information about the book's theme	5	28%
Exploring information about the author	5	28%
Suggesting a friend read the book	11	61%
Choosing no follow-up activity	2	11%

Table B3

Survey Question 9: What kinds of books do you like to read?

Kinds of books	Number of students out of 18	Percentage of students
Biographies	3	17%
Classic/Historical Novels	1	6%
Fiction	3	17%
Non-fiction	5	28%
Poetry	1	6%
Romance	3	17%
Science Fiction/Fantasy	2	11%
Mystery/Suspense	9	50%
Plays/Drama	2	11%
History	6	33%
Other choices: Politics, religion, spiritual or inspirational, music, travel, health, magazines	9	50%

Table B4

Survey Question 10: How do you choose a good book to read?

Text-selection process	Number of Students out of 18	Percentage of students
Liked the author	1	6%
Interested in topic	6	33%
Recommended by friends	7	39%
Browsed stores or libraries	2	11%
Chose from best seller lists	4	22%
Read title or theme excerpt	1	6%

Table B5

Survey Question 16: What is your attitude toward reading?

Survey Question 17: Do you feel that you are a good reader?

Attitudes toward reading	Number of students out of 18	Percentage of students
Like reading	8	45%
Love reading	8	45%
Do not like reading	2	10%
Hate reading	0	0%
I am a good reader	17	95%
I am not a good reader	1	5%