College Students' Reflections on Reading

Cindy Gillespie
Ball State University

Recommended Citation

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY
**Dorothy J. McGinnis
Reading Center and Clinic**

College Students' Reflections on Reading

Cindy Gillespie

Many college students are required to enroll in remedial or developmental classes because it is believed that they are at-risk: their abilities are insufficient for the demands of college work. Once classified as at-risk, these students usually find themselves in reading classes designed to improve comprehension, reading speed, vocabulary, study skills and/or content area reading.

Instructors of such courses generally collect additional data relevant to the students' reading ability or disability through formal or informal testing. While evidence documenting students' academic abilities has been collected rather routinely, data concerning the affective factors defined as emotional activities or feelings, which may be influential in motivating students to read to learn or to read for pleasure, receive little attention.

Correlational research has demonstrated that a definite positive relation does exist between affective factors and achievement although causal relations have not been substantiated (Beane, Lipka and Ludewig, 1980; Byrne, 1984; Kahn and Weiss, 1973; Silvernail, 1985). However, Scheirer and Kraut (1979) suggest empirical evidence exists which does indicate that self-concept enhancement is a significant causal factor in educational achievement.

Reading researchers have also acknowledged the importance of affect on reading achievement. Nieratka and Epstein (1981) sought to develop an instrument which could be used to assess students' perceptions of reading. The most important factor identified by the students was attitude toward reading. Gadzella and Williamson (1984) explored the relations among study skills, self concept and academic achievement. Significant coefficients were found between grade point average and self-concept scores. Walberg and Tsai (1985) found that one of the strongest correlates of reading achievement was attitude towards reading. Marsh and Penn (1986) investigated the relation between self-efficacy and reading achievement and concluded that developmental programs should include attention to students' self perceptions.

Given that attitude and self-concept may influence a student's reading success or failure, it is important and necessary to examine these affective aspects as they relate to college readers. Two studies, similar to the present investigation, were conducted by Nelson (1983, 1989). The 1983 study asked developmental reading students to react to a forced-choice questionnaire concerning memories of experiences related to reading in both elementary and high school. Generally, students had positive recollections about learning to read. The 1989 study asked developmental students to rate their feelings about learning to read and the effects teachers, home and materials had on their reading, to check from among alternatives what they liked least about reading in elementary school and high school, and to list favorite books.

This investigation differs in that an open-ended questionnaire was used to allow students to respond freely to questions designed to examine students' attitudes toward

reading, their self-concepts related to reading, and their recollections of learning to read, both at home and at school.

Method

Subjects. The subjects for this investigation were all students who were enrolled in a semester-long develop-mental reading course during one academic year at a mid-western university. These students were required to take such a class because their scores on the reading compre-hension subtest of the Scholastic Aptitude Test were less than or equal to 29. All 121 incoming freshmen enrolled in developmental reading classes (71 females and 50 males) were surveyed at the beginning of fall semester. An addi-tional 70 students (50 females and 20 males) who enrolled in the same developmental reading class spring semester were also surveyed.

Materials. The survey instrument was an adapted version of those suggested by Hoffman (1988) and Nelson (1983). Hoffman's (1988) instrument is an open-ended questionnaire designed to be used for preservice elemen-tary teachers. Nelson's (1983) instrument was a rating scale with 15 items. 1) What is your definition of reading? 2) Do you consider yourself a reader — why or why not? 3) How would you describe your reading ability? 4) How do you read for your college courses? Tell where, when and how you read. 5) How do you read for pleasure? Tell where and when you read. 6) What do you remember about learning to read at home? Include both positive and negative experi-ences. 7) What do you remember about learning to read in school? Include both positive and negative experiences. 8) What do you remember as your best reading experience prior to entering college? 9) What do you remember as your worst reading experience prior to entering college? 10)

What kind of reading do you do now? (The students were asked to check what they read from among a list which included newspapers, magazines, directions, supermarket tabloids, mail, comic books, fiction, nonfiction, religious materials, and other. If they checked *other*, they were asked to identify what they read.) 11) From what type of reading do you get the most pleasure? 12) What is your favorite type of book? 13) What books have you read recently? 14) How many hours do you normally spend reading for pleasure in a week? 15) How many hours do you normally spend reading for classes in a week?

Procedure. Subjects were given the survey instrument prior to any instruction in the developmental reading class. They were asked first to fill out the demographic information (gender and class status). Next, the students were given the survey instrument and asked to respond in writing to the aforementioned questions. No time limits were set. Once the surveys were completed, the data were tabulated (see Appendix).

Discussion

With respect to students' definitions, over 50 percent of the students believed that reading is 1) a word-by-word or line-by-line procedure, 2) a skill-oriented process, 3) a sounding-out activity, or 4) did not provide a definition of reading. Additionally, of those students who gave comprehension-based definitions, none mentioned interacting with the text or integrating new information with existing knowledge. These students appear to have a rather narrow definition of reading or no definition at all. For students to become skilled readers, they must view reading in a broader sense. Such narrow definitions of reading can and should be expanded through instruction.

Approximately as many students considered themselves readers as nonreaders. Their responses were most often based on whether or not they liked reading rather than relating their answers to their definitions of reading. It appears as though many of the students need to develop a positive attitude toward reading to enable them to become lifelong readers.

The findings related to students' perceptions of their reading ability are in agreement with findings reported by Reed (1989), who suggests that students enrolling in developmental reading courses claim they do not need the courses because they already know how to read sufficiently well to pass college courses. This response may not be as startling as one might guess. If students perceived reading from a skills point of view, then it seems logical for them to believe that they already know about pronouncing words, sound-symbol relationships, reading sentences, and selecting main ideas. Therefore, it becomes vitally important to expand students' definitions of reading through instruction.

Results related to reading for pleasure were encouraging, while results related to reading for classes were somewhat less encouraging. A total of 71 percent of the students said they found time to read for pleasure for several hours over the course of a week. Eighty percent of the students reported reading the assigned class text assigned for class in various traditional locations. That is encouraging; what is less encouraging are the techniques employed while reading. Most students reported using standard practices such as highlighting the text, taking notes, and outlining the material which indicate that students may have a limited knowledge of strategies to employ to learn from a textbook. Additional reading and study strategies could and should be taught to the students.

An interesting conclusion may be drawn from the question related to what the students remembered about learning to read at home. There is no evidence to suggest that students developed either positive or negative attitudes from their reading experiences at home. Although negative attitudes did not develop in most students, it appears as though positive attitudes were not fostered. Negative attitudes were evident from a small percentage of students. The generalization that can be made about the at-risk students' recollections of learning to read at home is that none of the students appeared to have developed strong positive attitudes toward reading. College developmental reading classes must attend to the affective domain, particularly working to foster more positive attitudes toward reading.

By far the most popular response to what students recalled about learning to read in school was reading orally in teacher-selected groups, phonics instruction, and workbook pages. Neither positive nor negative connotations were attached to their responses. Negative responses were, however, reported by over one-third of the students. The conclusion which may be drawn is that positive attitudes toward reading were not developed or nurtured while these students were in school. Through instruction and enthusiastic modeling, students could begin to develop a positive attitude toward reading.

According to over two-thirds of the students the best reading experience prior to entering college was reading novels. Conversely, 72 percent of the students reported the worst reading experiences prior to college were oral reading and book reports. Knowing that students enjoy reading novels but do not like reading aloud or reading for book reports is beneficial to instructors who are developing curricula for college developmental reading classes. A

more efficient and effective use of class time would be to use materials that students enjoy reading, rather than skill-and-drill workbook pages.

Implications

The most significant implication which may be drawn from this investigation and from previous research is that an assessment instrument (reading inventories, student journals, attitude inventories and interest inventories) to evaluate the factors which affect reading should be developed and administered to students. Such assessment may assist instructors in determining whether emotional factors, studying difficulties, reading problems, time management problems or misconceptions about the reading process may be impairing students' progress in reading.

Through instruction students can broaden their views of reading and the reading process as well as develop positive self-concepts toward reading. College reading instructors may choose from a variety of acceptable teaching strategies and techniques to provide this much-needed instruction. One appropriate teaching strategy would be to combine a highly structured, teacher-directed stye of instruction with cooperative learning experiences. Combining both types of instruction would allow the students the opportunity to discuss information and ideas with their peers while the teacher provides students with the guidance and instruction as it is needed.

Additional techniques which may be used to improve or address the affective needs of students include discussion, role-playing, cooperative problem-solving, goal setting, teacher modeling, and peer modeling. Corno and Mandinach (1983) and Schunk (1986) suggest that including strategy instruction may help students develop more

positive self-concepts about their academic abilities. Providing students with strategies for reading and studying would appear to be warranted considering the limited number of techniques used by the students in this investigation.

It is time to change the present developmental reading course. Instead of developmental reading classes designed only to improve comprehension, reading speed, vocabulary, study skills and content area reading, such classes should be designed to promote and encourage positive self-concepts as well as positive attitudes toward reading. This can be accomplished by providing students with more interesting assignments and reading materials, reading materials related to career goals, and reading materials related to their required and major courses. In addition, students must be encouraged to read for pleasure. Allowing class time for Sustained Silent Reading using student-selected books could be effective in fostering a more positive attitude toward reading.

The results of this survey can be valuable to those who are teaching or preparing to teach college at-risk students. Evidence from research investigations suggests that there is a relation between self-concept and academic achievement. Therefore, for students to be successful readers they must have a positive affective predisposition toward reading instruction.

Purkey (1970, p. 27) suggests that "although the data do not provide clear-cut evidence about which comes first — a positive self-concept or scholastic success, a negative self-concept or scholastic failure — it does stress a strong reciprocal relationship and gives us reason to assume that enhancing the self-concept is a vital influence in improving academic performance."

References

Beane, J.A., Lipka, R.P., & Ludewig, J.W. (1980). Synthesis of research on self-concept. *Educational Leadership, 38*, 84-89.

Byrne, B. (1984). The general/academic self-concept nomological network: A review of construct validation research. *Review of Educational Research, 54*, 427-526.

Corno, L., & Mandinach, E.B. (1983). The role of cognitive engagement in classroom learning and motivation. *Educational Psychologist, 18*, 88-108.

Gadzella, B., & Williamson, J.D. (1984). Study skills, self-concept and academic achievement. *Psychological Reports, 54*, 923-929.

Hoffman, J. (1988). *Understanding reading instruction*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Kahn, S.B., & Weiss, J. (1973). The teaching of affective responses. In R.M.W. Trovers (Ed.), *The second handbook of research on teaching*, 759-804. Chicago IL: Rand McNally.

Marsh, D.D., & Penn, D.M. (1986). Self-efficacy and reading achievement. *Journal of College Reading and Learning, 19*, 78-86.

Nelson, R. (1989). *College students' views of reading*. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service ED 315 730)

Nelson, R. (1983). *How college students feel about their school reading experiences*. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service ED 236 581)

Nieratka, E., & Epstein, I. (1981). *College students' self-perceptions on factors which have influenced their reading ability*. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service ED 213 003)

Purkey, W.W. (1970). *Self-concept and school achievement*. Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice Hall.

Reed, K. (1989). Expectation vs. ability: Junior college reading skills. *Journal of Reading, 32*, 537-541.

Scheirer, M.A., & Kraut, R.E. (1979). Increasing educational achievement via self-concept change. *Review of Educational Research, 46*, 131-150.

Schunk, D.H. (1986). Verbalization and children's self-regulated learning. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 11*, 347-369.

Silvernail, D.L. (1985). Developing positive student self-concept. *Analysis and Action Series*. Washington D.C.: National Education Association.

Walberg, H.J., & Tsai, S.L. (1985). Correlates of reading achievement and attitude: A national assessment study. *Journal of Educational Research, 78*, 159-167.

Cindy Gillespie is a faculty member in the Department of Elementary Education at Ball State University, Muncie Indiana.

Appendix

Question 1: What is your definition of reading?
After scanning the definitions provided by the students, their re-
sponses seemed to fall into three categories: *skill-related*, *comprehension-
based*, and *interactive*. Some of the students told why they read, rather than
provided a definition for reading. These responses were placed into a cate-
gory labeled *purposes for reading*. Approximately 8% of the students gave
both a definition of reading and a purpose for reading; only their definitions of
reading were recorded. Prior to sorting the definitions into the afore-
mentioned categories, twenty of the responses (10%) were randomly se-
lected and categorized independently by two reading education professors to
establish interrater reliability. A .90 proportion of raters' agreement was
achieved.

Skills-Based Definitions. A total of 44% of the students' responses
were classified as skills-based definitions. Definitions which were placed into
this category included responses which emphasized phonics and word iden-
tification. Additionally, definitions which focused on specific skills such as
drawing conclusions and selecting main ideas were included in this category.

Comprehension-Based Definitions. A total of 41% of the responses
could be classified as comprehension-based definitions. These definitions
used the words *comprehending*, *understanding*, and *interpreting*.
Responses defining reading as learning were also included in this category.

Interactive Definitions. Very few students (5%) wrote responses which
could be classified as interactive definitions (a combination of skill-based and
comprehension-based views). Responses that simultaneously mentioned
decoding and comprehension were categorized as interactive.

Purposes for Reading. The remaining students' responses (10%) fell
into the category of purposes for reading. Students wrote that reading was
something that was done for enjoyment and/or relaxation. In all cases where
students' responses were placed into this category, there was no other infor-
mation provided. These students did not provide a definition for reading; in-
stead, they wrote about why they read.

Question 2: Do you consider yourself a reader?   Why or why not?
Overall, over half of the students (58%) considered themselves read-
ers. Believing that the responses to this question were dependent upon the
definitions written by each student, the responses were coded with respect to
question one. However, an inspection of the data shows that only 36% of the
students based their responses to this question on their definitions of read-
ing. The rest of the students answered this question based on whether they
liked reading and read (31%) or whether they disliked reading and did not read
(33%).

Question 3: How would you describe your reading ability?
One-fourth of the students described their reading ability as excellent,
really good, good, or above average, while over half of the students stated

their reading ability was average, OK, or adequate. Only 22% of the students described their reading ability as below average, not very good, poor, low, or slow. A few students (1%) said their reading ability was heavily dependent upon what they were reading.

Question 4:   How would you describe your reading for your college courses?

A total of 152 students (80%) reported that they read the textbook for their classes and gave complete responses to this question while 39 (20%) said they did not read the assigned text and did not respond further to the question. All 152 students who read the assigned text reported reading for their classes in their dorm rooms and/or in the library. Over half of the students (58%) said they read in the late afternoon or evening. The rest of the students who read the textbook (22%) reported reading in the morning, immediately after or between classes. The most often cited techniques employed while reading included highlighting the text (24%), taking notes (18%), reading slowly to understand the material (13%), outlining the material (10%), reading everything twice (9%), and reading the text and looking up vocabulary (6%).

Question 5:   How would you describe your reading for pleasure?

Of the students surveyed, 28% said they did not read for pleasure. The rest of the students (72%) reported reading for pleasure. Most of the students (58%) reported reading in their spare time, while the others (14%) reported reading before going to bed. When asked where they read for pleasure, 60% reported reading in their rooms. The rest of the students said they read anywhere.

Question 6:   What do you remember about learning to read at home?

The most frequent response to this question (35%) was that students said they had no recollection of any reading experiences at home or did not read at home. The second most common response (25%) was that students remembered reading aloud, reading specific books, and/or pronouncing words to parents, siblings, or grandparents. Additionally 8% of the students said they were forced by their parents to read aloud, while 7% of the students reported their parents didn't press the issue of reading at home. One-fifth of the students recalled their parents reading to them.

Question 7:   What do you remember about learning to read at school?

Students most frequently recalled reading aloud in assigned groups (37%), while 20% of the students remembered sounding out words, phonics instruction, and/or completing workbook pages. There were no negative or positive connotations attached to their responses. Negative responses were, however, reported by an additional 25% of the students. These students recalled being embarrassed because of mistakes they made while reading orally. Moreover, 8% of the students' recollections were of being placed in special reading classes. The remaining 10% of the students recalled being bored with the stories in the textbooks.

Question 8:   What do you remember as your best reading experience prior to entering college?

Over half of the students (67%) reported that their best reading experiences prior to entering college were reading novels for school and/or for pleasure. One-fourth of the students said that they enjoyed reading specific materials such as plays, religious materials, historical books, and the classics; 7% of the students reported not remembering a best reading experience.

Question 9:   What do you remember as your worst reading experience prior to entering college?

The most-often reported worst reading experience was reading aloud and mispronouncing words; 44% of the students said they were embarrassed when they read aloud in class. Over one-fourth of the students did not like reading plays, poetry, English literature, books for term papers, or novels as a class, 28% of the students objected to reading for writing book reports, and 3% of the students could not recall their worst experiences.

Question 10:   What are you reading?

The purpose of the last section of the survey was to find out what college at-risk students were reading. First, they were asked to check the items they read. The most commonly read materials included newspapers (93%), magazines (88%), fiction books (68%) and nonfiction books (55%). The second item asked "From what type of reading do you get the most pleasure?" Ten% said they got the most pleasure from reading magazines, newspapers (3%); fiction (56%); nonfiction (31%). The third item asked about their favorite type of book; 57% reported fiction as their favorite type of books; nonfiction (32%); comedy (eight%); westerns (three%).

Students were also asked to approximate the number of hours they read for pleasure and for classes. Nearly 90% of the students read less than or equal to five hours per week for pleasure; 51% said they read less than or equal to five hours per week for classes. Finally, students were asked to list some books they had read recently. The most frequently mentioned books included the Bible, *To Kill a Mockingbird, The Color Purple, The Scarlet Letter, The Great Gatsby, A Tale of Two Cities, A Christmas Carol, The House of Seven Gables, A Farewell to Arms, Animal Farm, 1984,* and *Fahrenheit 451.* Other students reported reading self-help books, but could not recall the titles. A large majority of students also indicated their choice of books was dependent upon the author. The most frequently-read authors included V.C. Andrews, Stephen King, Danielle Steel, Lawrence Sanders, Mary Higgins Clark, Sidney Sheldon, Jackie Collins and Margaret Truman.