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READING SKILLS IN A PAPERBACK CLASSROOM

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Humanities teachers have been reluctant, with justification, to trust mathematical measurements of literary experience. They know that the learning in which students participate in the classroom cannot be put on a bubble sheet with a number two pencil, but the threat of accountability and standardized testing is forcing them into a defensive position. Those teachers who have enjoyed the satisfactions of working with relevant material in the past few years are now threatened by basics. The good teachers, of course, never stopped teaching the basics but found that relevancy could be used as a motivational tool. The best of the lot always learn how to ride out the waves of educational fadism by adapting the demands of current philosophy to fit what they believed all along.

Paperback literature classes have been a fad of the past decade. In recent times teachers offering these courses have felt the need to be defensive about their "trash lit." Classic teachers tend to look down on popular fiction as a "dumping ground" for students who can't pass the "real" literature courses, basic skills proponents frown because they feel poor readers should be in remedial classes learning roots and suffixes from specialists and the popular fiction teachers defend their paperback "junk" on the basis that they are teaching students to "like" to read. "Liking" is one aspect of relevancy, of course, but in the age of accountability it is a very difficult philosophy to justify because it can't be empirically measured. Reading levels, however, can be measured using standardized tests, the most threatening weapon of the back to basics proponent. All of the various points of view do agree somewhat loosely that reading levels should be affected by the amount of material read, and students should read more books if they could read the ones they like to read. The following study was an attempt to find out how much liking affected measurable skills.

The popular fiction course offered a selection of carefully collected high interest paperbacks so that students were able to choose from a wide variety of titles and read in volume. A few books were required reading for all students, some books were selected from a choice of titles offered and a few books were independently provided by the student. The course was designed as an eighteen week semester elective for juniors and seniors, and the students were required to read nine books, or an average of one every two weeks. This number often sounds overwhelming to the new student who has never read a single book for

pleasure, but in the five years the course has been offered, there have been very few who failed to meet the basic requirements. The book selection varies every semester, but the books used during the period of this study are listed on the following chart:

Required Books	Choice of one or more from each unit below	
	Science Fiction/Fantasy	Assorted Novels
<i>And Then There Were None</i>	<i>Alas, Babylon</i>	<i>Alive</i>
<i>A Day No Pigs Would Die</i>	<i>Day of the Triffids</i>	<i>All Quiet on the Western Front</i>
<i>Of Mice and Men</i>	<i>Fahrenheit 451</i>	<i>Andromeda Strain</i>
<i>The Pigman</i>	<i>The Hephaestus Plague</i>	<i>Black Boy</i>
<i>Red Sky at Morning</i>	<i>The Hobbit</i>	<i>I Never Promised You a Rose Garden</i>
<i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i>	<i>The Last Unicorn</i>	<i>Runway 08</i>
<i>Walkabout</i>	<i>1984</i>	<i>Terminal Man</i>
	<i>The Swarm</i>	<i>We Have Always Lived in the Castle</i>
	<i>Watership Down</i>	

Students were required to complete one or more assignments for each book and pass an objective test as a measure of whether the book had been read and understood. For purposes of this study, books were counted as read if the objective test was passed with a score of 70% or better. Grades in the course were given on the basis of the average of grades earned on required assignments and tests plus additional credit allowed for extra books read. To receive an "A" in the course, students had to read two independently selected books for each of the two grade periods, bringing their required total to thirteen books for the semester. During the course of this study, the average number of books read was 9.7, which was 0.7 books higher than the requirement for the course; the lowest number read was two and the highest was eighteen. Credit for reading independently selected books was gained in one or two ways: students could write the standard book report following a required format, or they could participate in a book conference. Book conferences were scheduled for groups of four to six, and students had to submit a copy of the book to the teacher several days in advance. The main purpose of the book conference was for the students participating to convince the other members of the group to read the book they had completed. Conferences were held at a round table and students were asked to summarize the general plot idea of their book in a very few sentences and then give a short critical evaluation telling what they liked about the book. In some cases students were asked to discuss thematic ideas while in other books character or plot was a more interesting aspect to share. Book conferences were among the most satisfying phases of the course. Students discussed something they enjoyed in a non-threatening

atmosphere, student-teacher relationship improved with small group communication and a great deal of lending and borrowing took place over the table.

All books in the course were rated by length. The average novel is about 150-250 pages long and was rated as one point with longer novels receiving more points. *The Hobbit*, for example, was a two point book while *Watership Down* was credited at three points. The basic requirement of nine books could be met with nine points rather than nine titles which encouraged students to read longer books.

The assignments required for each book varied. A few books had the traditional literary analysis study questions to accompany them. *To Kill A Mockingbird* lends itself to this treatment as it is a very long book, and poor readers miss many of the meaningful points if they do not have study guides to follow. *And Then There Were None* had a puzzle grid to complete that helped the students sort the characters and figure out "Who done it?" Many of the books had optional creative assignments. In *The Last Unicorn*, for example, students could draw or create the mythological figures discussed in the book, and the *Runway 08* assignment provided an opportunity to write a plot outline for a disaster story. Many of the books had several optional assignments and students chose the one they preferred.

Enrollment and informal surveys indicated that the course was successful. Students seemed to be learning to like to read. The measurable aspects of the study were concerned with how much reading levels might be raised by reading a prescribed number of high interest books in a short period of time. Students were pre-tested and post-tested in the one semester course using the Nelson-Denny Reading Test (Form C) for vocabulary, comprehension and rate levels. Records were also kept of the number of books read and the letter grades students earned in the course. A control group of comparable students who were not taking a literature course were tested for comparison. There were 69 students in the test group and 32 students in the control group. Mean scores for each group are summarized in the chart on the following page.

It will be noted that the pre-test scores of the test group are slightly higher than the control group. An analysis of variance was run between the two groups which indicated a 0.001 chance for error, or not enough to affect the results of this study.

The control group gained almost the equivalent of one semester in reading skills during the semester test period. The control group for this study was chosen from composition classes, and it can be assumed they were doing an average amount of reading in other courses. The popular fiction students showed an average gain of 1.87 years for all tests with the largest gain of 2.6 years in reading rate. The final column on the chart shows the significant gains that the popular fiction students exhibited above the gains achieved by the control group. These scores indicate that a reading course of this nature can accelerate reading scores for vocabulary to eight months above the norm as established by the

Nelson-Denny Reading Scores				
Control Group: Non-literature students				
	Raw	Pre-Test	Raw	Post-Test
	Score	Grade	Score	Grade
		Equivalent		Equivalent
Vocabulary	21.4	11.5	22.4	11.8
Comprehension	29.5	9.8	30.9	10.4
Total	50.7	10.7	53.3	11.1
Rate	202.0	9.8	198.1	9.4

Test Group: Popular Fiction students				
	Raw	Pre-Test	Raw	Post-Test
	Score	Grade	Score	Grade
		Equivalent		Equivalent
Vocabulary	23.7	12.3	28.4	13.4
Comprehension	33.4	11.3	39.0	13.0
Total	57.1	11.8	67.5	13.1
Rate	198	9.4	226.5	12.0

Grade Equivalent Changes			
	Control	Test	Significant
	Group	Group	Gain: Test
			minus
			Control
Vocabulary	+ 0.3	+ 1.1	+ 0.8
Comprehension	+ 0.6	+ 1.7	+ 1.1
Total	+ 0.4	+ 1.3	+ 0.9
Rate	-0.4	+ 2.6	+ 2.6

control group and for comprehension, one year and one month above the norm. The most dramatic gain, however, is in the reading rate where students increased 2.6 years in the literature course and showed a loss in the control group.

In addition to the reading skills tests on these students, pre-course and post-course evaluations were completed. Before the course began, students were asked how many books they had read for their own enjoyment in the past year and what their attitude was toward reading. Answers indicated that well over half the class did not read for enjoyment at all, and about one-fourth had selected the course because they already loved to read. At the end of the class period, well over half the students indicated that the most valuable part of the course to them had been to learn to enjoy reading. Many students indicated plans to continue the habit. The basic philosophy for this course from its conception was to try to interest students in independent reading for enjoyment, and it appears that reading for enjoyment is also an effective means of increasing skill levels.

One score in the above charts opens an area for future speculation. The control group showed a drop in reading rate that appears to be

significant. This study was run during the second semester of the school year, and many of the students in the control group had just completed a course comparable to the popular fiction course. The drop in score could indicate that such a rapid increase in reading rate must be practiced to be maintained. It appears that rate slows if students are reading only text book or technical information. The scores would indicate that popular fiction reading will increase rate quite rapidly.

Each student in the study was provided with an individual profile of both pre-test and post-test scores. The students who made the most dramatic individual gains were students who said they had never independently read a book for pleasure before. Students were counseled to help them select future courses to aid deficiencies and were encouraged to continue independent reading.

As mentioned earlier, it is difficult for humanities teachers to judge experience in the classroom by mathematical values, and this difficulty is never more apparent than when a letter grade must be placed on the semester's work. One part of the study was concerned with how much the level of the basic skill the student possessed affected the grade he or she received in the course. It was suspected that many students were overcoming reading deficiencies through individual determination. Figures did not prove this assumption to be true, as shown in the following chart where grades are correlated with reading level, with changes in reading scores and with the number of books read.

Letter Grade Earned	Post-test Grade Equivalent		Raw Score Changes		Average Books Read
	Total Score	Rate Score	Total Score	Rate Score	
A	15	13.5	13.6	35.8	14
B	13.1	12.9	9.7	44.8	11.3
C	12.8	12.7	10.8	18.9	9.7
D	12.0	8.7	8.7	14.8	6.5
F	10.9	9.7	11.2	18.2	4

It can be seen on the chart that there is a direct correlation between the total post-test skills level scores and the grade received in the course, with the "A" students having the highest reading levels at the Grade 15 total level and a reading rate equivalent to grade 13.5. It is also interesting to note, however, that the mean total score on students who failed the course is 10.9 which is well above the reading levels of most paperback novels that fall between the 7-10 grade reading level. The greatest change in total scores was once again found in the "A" students, but the second greatest change was in the failing students. Students failed this course because they did the work as reflected in the direct correlation between grades and average number of books read. It can probably be projected that the total change scores in the failing students who only averaged reading four books would be dramatically affected if they could be motivated to complete the work in the course. There is a

very high repeat rate in this course with students who fail one semester and then repeat and pass the course. These students often start with a poor attitude which is difficult to overcome in one semester, but sharing the experience with enthusiastic participants in the course often leads them to revise their attitudes and repeat quite successfully. This experience would argue strongly for courses that place poor readers with achievers rather than separating them into remedial sections.

The assumption has been made for a long time that students will learn to read better if they have something to read that they enjoy. The recent publicity about the profit statements of publishing houses, the obvious proliferation of paperback book stores and the crowds gathered around the quickly emptied paperback racks in the local supermarket should convince many critics of what kinds of books people enjoy reading today. The paperback teacher can give testimony about losing books to the “real” literature teachers who borrow the “trash” to read for fun. A popular fiction course can’t be defended on the merit of literary standards, and it won’t be kept on the curriculum menu much longer if teachers continue to be defensive about trying to get students to “like” to read. The results of this study indicate that liking, however, can be a strong motivational factor in the increase of basic skills, and it is pretty hard to argue with numerical facts in a statistical world.