Reading for Pleasure

Learners' personal reading choices can provide teachers with ideas on how to motivate and support them

by Sondra Cuban

After tutoring, teaching, and doing research in literacy programs, I wanted to know more about how literacy fits into women's lives, thinking that this could help me understand better how to serve women learners in programs. I conducted a lengthy qualitative study of 10 women learners for my doctoral dissertation. I wanted to find out if the women learners I was studying read outside of the program, what they wanted to read about, and what their purposes were for reading. I focus here on my interviews with four women and what their experiences suggest for curriculum and instruction in literacy programs.

Gloria, Donna, Lourdes, and Elizabeth were enrolled in a computer-assisted literacy program in a semirural area of Hawaii. Gloria and Donna were beginning adult basic education (ABE) students; Lourdes and Elizabeth, both students of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), were at slightly higher levels in the program. Donna was at the lowest level of literacy of the four women and rarely read. She told me she really wanted to read love stories but felt she couldn't. She said, "I guess my mind's so tired that I get frustrated and give up. I guess, like I said - too much stuff going [on] in my mind." Her desire to read love stories was fueled by the romances and comedies she watched on TV, which she enjoyed and which distracted her from her family problems.

The women in the study all read and wanted to read popular - culture materials - commercially published books also referred to as genre and trade books - that were not, for the most part, used in the literacy program they attended. They also used reading for similar ends: they read to make themselves feel better. I interviewed the women over the course of a year about their schooling and work experiences, the ways they learned in their families of origin, and about their use of mass media: anything from watching television to reading books. I also observed them and interviewed staff in the program within this period. I discovered gaps between what the women read and wanted to read outside of the program and what the program offered.

In the literacy program, they learned basic keyboarding skills, English grammar, phonics, and oral pronunciation. Instruction in the program tended towards skills-based learning from commercial texts such as student dictionaries, Laubach books such as the Challenger series, reading skills workbooks such as the Steck-Vaughn Reading for Today series, as well as pre-GED materials. The program also used educational and diagnostic software and typing program tutorials. Library books and newspapers were sometimes brought into the tutoring instruction but were not central to the curriculum.

The Research

Each woman participated in five interviews between August, 1997, and May, 1998. Four of the interviews lasted between one and two hours and concerned the women's literacy and learning in school, their work, families, and social networks, as well as their use of mass media. The biographical interview was shorter and more about how literacy fit into women's lives, thinking that this could help me understand better how to serve women learners in programs. I discovered gaps between what the women read and wanted to read outside of the program and what the program offered.

Gloria, Lourdes, and Elizabeth did read outside of the literacy program, and although I did not ask them how much they read or venture into the technical aspects of their reading, they described memorable reading experiences and the effects the books had on them. They read mainly for pleasure and to reduce tension, reading stories that nurtured them emotionally. The reading materials they referred to in the interviews would, by most standards, be considered too difficult for the learning level in which the program placed them. Lourdes, for example,
was at an ESOL level of competency 2 (between grades 4.5 and 6.5). She described what she learned from reading Gail Sheehy's *The Silent Passage*, a book that deeply affected her. Lourdes also said she read the Bible and small prayer books. She read these books regularly, and as needed, sometimes on a daily basis.

**Elizabeth**

Elizabeth, a 70-year-old naturalized Japanese woman, was a meat wrapper for most of her working years. She confided in me with both excitement and shame that she had gotten hooked on soap operas through a friend, even videotaping them while she was away. She told me about the character development in these shows and that an advantage to watching them was that they helped her learn standard English. She also read books that had romantic storylines.

Reading and eating in conjunction with TV watching were important and ritualized for Elizabeth, who also read Japanese novels. Elizabeth explained how she read when she was younger, "every day because I'm home alone so breakfast, lunch, dinner, I have a book stand in the center, I have the book there while I'm eating - I read books." She read trade books, for example, *The Joy Luck Club*, by Amy Tan, which helped with her English vocabulary and was stimulating to her. She also listened to tapes of this book. Her family members and acquaintances were uninformed about the intense pain a serious back problem gave her. So, turning to books and going to classes seemed like a smart move. "I have lots of pain. [Be] cause I don't complain ... I'm not expecting that person always feels sorry for you," she said.

**Gloria**

Gloria, a Hawaiian woman in her early 50s who spent her younger years working on macadamia farms and in pineapple factories, was worried about being able to pay her rent due to welfare cuts. She explained, "and, you know, like welfare - even though you know you're true [being honest], they don't know, they just give you hard time." She read the Bible every day and related to it as "a love letter" and a source of wisdom. She also listened to Bible tapes, used Bible software, discussed the Bible with her pastor and his wife, and used biblical resources to teach children in Sunday school. These activities invigorated her and distracted her from her worries. When she felt trapped by the welfare system, she sought spiritual materials for the direction and comfort they provided.

"The book. It's more intimate [than the computerized version of the Bible] ... because that is more like a study tool. And then when you're reading, this is what the pastor said, when you're reading, it's like a love letter. Like somebody wrote to you and say how much he loves you. So the Bible is actually a love letter and he telling you what's taking place in the world."

**Lourdes**

Lourdes, a naturalized Mexican mother who used to sew aloha shirts and grade papaya, was in her 50s. Now a health aide, she was married to a local man. When facing problems with co-workers and her husband, Lourdes read her prayer book and inspirational books. She also watched a nun on television every night to relax and to seek encouragement. Oprah Winfrey and her guests, many of whom were authors, inspired her, and inspirational books gave her a sense of hope. This and other popular-culture books she read helped her to feel independent. As she described it, "The first book I read -- I'll never forget it. Was back in 19... maybe 1981, was with Norman Vincent Peale, the positive thinker. Oh that book was good. So from then on I start you know, in my head I can do it. They interest me to go back to work and to be independent] ... you know what I am now. Not to listen to my husband too much...."

She carried books in her purse and consulted them when she had "the blues." She learned to use them as a shield from pain, using them for comfort:

"...I have another one [a book], pick-me-up-prayers. Pick me up. And it's, like, if I do a lot of those things for somebody, then something goes wrong, and I remember what that book says... So these little books help me a lot. Oh, it make me feel good because you know that God is here."
The Theory

Cultural theories of reading for pleasure, including reading response theory (see Storey, 1993; Simonds, 1992; Radway, 1991; Fiske, 1989; Modleski, 1982), focus on the psychological benefits readers receive from reading mass-produced materials, otherwise called “popular texts.” Pleasure reading is pleasurable because it can bring out the “melodramatic imagination” of women readers (Storey, p. 141). It provides “a terrain on which to dream” (Storey, p. 148) with fantasies that both reflect and counter “the very real problems and tensions in women's lives” (Modleski, 1982, p. 14).

“Popular culture texts” or “genre literature” (self-help books, mysteries, romance novels, Christian literature, even the Bible) may be favored by casual readers over other “classical” literature (i.e., “great books”) because they evoke readers’ emotions and are not intimidating. They carry familiar messages from the media that are open for interpretations. John Fiske refers to these texts as “producerly” (p.103) because the story lines do not follow strict rules and they contain many “loose ends” and “gaps” that seduce readers to fill them in and produce new meanings. These meanings are themselves relevant to readers’ lives, feelings, and cultures. This process is possible because the texts are open and accessible. Readers identify with strong and weak characters because the characters act out their problems in ways that readers understand and desire. The readers can imagine themselves as treasured heroines and feel emotionally strong.

Janice Radway (1991) studied 42 women romance readers, many of whom had some college education. She learned that the women often read romances when they were under stress and depressed or just to relax; it had tranquilizing effects. Reading these stories allowed them to unwind and focus on their “personal needs, desires and pleasures.” (p. 61). It also fulfilled their fantasies of being cared for by another person. The women knowingly read and reread the formulaic accounts for a desired emotional experience, in part, as a “reversal of the oppression and emotional abandonment suffered by women in real life” (p. 55).

Reader-response theory offers another way to understand the role of reading in women's lives by asking not only about the meanings women receive from texts but also the feelings they bring to reading. Reader-response theory provides an approach for understanding and building on students' reading interests and their imaginations.

Other research demonstrates how pleasure reading can be used effectively in the classroom. Cho and Krashen's study (1994) found that women studying English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) who read romance novels (the Sweet Valley series) felt that this reading increased their vocabularies and their interest in reading as it helped them learn English. A practitioner-researcher, Donna Earl, reported that students in a literacy program read more outside when she focused on increasing their outside reading practices. She felt that providing learners with high-interest, easy-to-read materials is one factor in enabling learners to “learn to love reading” (1997, p. 1).

Lessons for Practice

Lourdes, Elizabeth, and Gloria turned to books for love, pleasure, and comfort, and I think Donna would read for similar reasons, if she felt she could. These women related to books in ways that nourished them emotionally and reflected their life concerns and gender roles. They also used electronic media, such as television, computers, and video, to supplement their pleasure reading. This reflects newer theories about electronic and print literacy technologies as intertwining and complex social activities: part of people's everyday social relations and identities, not divorced from public activities and institutions (see Brandt, 1990; Hemphill & Ianiro, 1995; Merrifield, 1997; Pattison, 1982; Tuman, 1992). Lourdes, for example, used two different types of media (prayer books and a television show featuring a nun) for the same purpose: comforting herself during rough times and to connect to her emotions. Her use of these sources also related to her gender, her access to technological resources, her generation, and her ethnicity.

Asking about and then listening to women's struggles and problems allows you to see their interests and needs at different life stages and under particular circumstances. It also allows you to understand their coping strategies and the resources and people to which they turn. The process of describing themselves helps them to become the “experts” and assert more control over the curriculum (see, CCLOW, 1996; Imel & Kerka, 1997). The same process can assist teachers to create curriculum based on learners' changing needs. It may be difficult to ask sensitive questions at intake, but as soon as rapport is established, this can be a very useful activity.

Learners like Donna, who claim they want to read love stories but still feel embarrassed about their literacy levels, might be doubly embarrassed to "come out" and admit to literacy staff that they want to read these stories and popular psychology books. She said, "I really feel stupid because I didn't do this long ago. Should of..." I said, I was so embarrassed to tell it. To face somebody and tell them, I still cannot do that you know and say, "I cannot read." It's really hard to come out." Pleasure reading and inspirational books may appear frivolous and
They read neither for pleasure, nor for culture or knowledge. They waste their valuable time in viewing film, TV serials, and playing cards or in idle gossiping for pleasure and pastime. They forget that books are the best friends, that reading provides best type of pleasure. It is a pleasure which can be recreated and shared with others. Reading provides us with valuable experience which would always stand us in good stead.

Concluding paragraph

Offering pleasure reading to a woman learner as one of many reading choices in a literacy program may make her feel that the program is an oasis rather than a tax on her energy. Offering pleasure reading that makes women feel good can "hook" women into reading because it is an enjoyable, emotionally stimulating practice. This type of reading can connect to women's emotional lives in a nontaxing way and potentially turn reading a satisfying daily ritual.

References


About the Author

*Sondra Cuban* finished her doctoral dissertation in 1999 and joined NCSALL as a research associate. She works on a longitudinal persistence study of students in selected library literacy programs.

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