
Reading & Happiness

By Lawrence Baines

In our era of instantaneous gratification, students are turning away from reading, yet reading offers pleasures beyond the momentary.

Several large-scale studies confirm that students nationwide are eschewing reading for other pursuits. Less than one third of 13-year-olds read daily; the percentage of 17-year-olds who read nothing for pleasure has ballooned. In a span of 20 years, American students have transformed from being among the most to the least avid readers of literature in the world.

When the Progress of International Reading Literacy Study polled 4th graders around the world, they found that American 4th graders placed near the top in terms of proficiency and near the bottom in terms of enjoyment. American 4th graders didn't detest reading; they just didn't derive much pleasure from it (Mullis et al. 2003).

The average time an American teenager spends reading has shrunk every year since 1976 and now sits at an all-time low of six minutes and 36 seconds per day (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2007). In 1976, 86% of high school seniors reported reading a book or magazine at least once per week. By 2004, the percentage of seniors who claimed to read at least once per week had dropped 19 points to 67% (Porterfield and Winkler 2007).

The last time that Americans spent more time reading than playing video games and surfing the Internet was 1996 (Baines 2008). Since 1996, time spent reading books has declined slightly while time spent playing video games and surfing the Internet has risen 400% (Veronis Suhler Stevenson 2006). Although web sites host vast repositories of free books online, research indicates that teens use the Internet for social networking, shopping, music downloading, and image searches. Reading novels online isn't even on the radar screen (Lenhart, Madden, and Hitlin 2005).

As Immanuel Kant noted, what makes people happy doesn't necessarily make them good or smart. The dictionary's definition of happiness is "having, showing, or causing a feeling of great pleasure, contentment, or joy," but philosophers, poets, theologians, and shamans have argued for more than two thousand years about what constitutes happiness. Perceptions of happiness usually fall into two categories: Type I, meaning gratification is *immediate*, and Type

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E, meaning gratification is *enduring*. Researchers in positive psychology have found that people who are happy in a Type E kind of way are smarter, kinder, healthier, more creative, more effective, more empathetic, and more altruistic than unhappy people.

Type I happiness results when a person eats a piece of gourmet candy; it dissipates when the candy is gone. Rousseau's definition of happiness as "a good bank account, a good cook, and good digestion" fits the temporal, sensory-based nature of Type I happiness.

Because two distinguishing features of life in the 21st century are immediacy and speed, Type I happiness fits easily into a busy lifestyle. The frenetic pace of contemporary life changes perceptions of what constitutes an intolerable waiting period. The average time spent viewing a web page has dropped to a matter of seconds (Nielsen 2007). We grow impatient when a jet taxis on the runway for more than a few minutes, when our computer doesn't boot up immediately, when results of a blood test aren't instantly

available, when the traffic light delays our journey for 30 seconds, when we're forced to listen to endlessly looping recorded messages while waiting to speak with a human being.

In contrast, individual reading requires a person to find a quiet location for careful decoding. Although some students choose to read while doing other tasks or as a group activity with friends, for most students reading is still a solitary endeavor (Papper, Holmes, and Popovich 2004; Clark and Foster 2005). Reading has come to represent an absurdly old-fashioned, even antisocial activity.

In general, students admit to being happiest when hanging out with friends and participating in a leisure activity of their own choosing; they're most miserable when alone with nothing to do (Csikszentmihalyi and Hunter 2003; Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, and Whalen 1996; Layard 2006). Unlike the sensate buzz from a bite of candy or the instant thrill from "leveling-up" in a video game, reading involves an investment of time and energy toward an uncertain payoff at some



point in the future. In competition with electronic media, reading as a leisure activity is losing its appeal.

Despite the lure of immediate gratification, a life built around the endless pursuit of Type I happiness can quickly become shallow or empty. Bertrand Rus-

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sell calls the pursuit of immediate pleasure a kind of “temporary suicide” and contends that a person “who seeks intoxication, in whatever form, has given up hope except in oblivion.” According to Thomas Jefferson (“virtue is the foundation of happiness”), Nietzsche (“virtue is the way to happiness”), and Aristotle (happiness is the “activity of the soul in accordance with virtue”), authentic satisfaction is more likely to be found in Type E (*enduring*) happiness. Aristotle described the progression to Type E happiness as predicated on interactions with words, as follows: conversing and reading → developing the intellect → seeking virtue → finding happiness.

In fact, research in psychology concurs with Aristotle’s contention that a hedonistic lifestyle is fundamentally unsatisfying. Having a goal beyond momentary sensory satiation and beyond one’s self-interest serves as a “buffer against depression.” Happiness, in this sense, is more a state of mind than a fleeting sensation.

Little about 21st-century American education pro-

motes wisdom as a goal, gratification as something to be delayed, happiness as worth the effort, or knowledge as its own reward. Apparently, reading must be justified in the context of innumerable other options.

It is uncertain what a retreat from books will mean for the future of education and the intellectual capital of the nation. However, if current trends continue, we are about to find out. **K**

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