



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

Vol. 14, No. 5

February 1, 2002

Should Our Graduates Be Able to Read?

Can a person be well educated without being able to read? My conclusion and that of the colleagues I have polled over the years is that the answer is "no." While media and computer technology can enhance learning and is good for some types of content delivery, it cannot replace reading.

More so than ever before, our students have to be prepared to be life-long learners if they are to succeed in a world that will require them to have several different careers before they retire. Good reading skills are essential to a person's ability to "reskill" him or her self. Without well-developed reading skills, students will have little chance of long term success. Historical analysis of educational requirements in society clearly indicates that demands for literacy continually increase.

However, the literacy levels of many of our students do not seem to be keeping up. Stories are common around Western Carolina University and most other universities about students not being able to read effectively. Some of the WCU examples I have heard in recent months include students who object to foreign films with subtitles because they can't read them fast enough, a student who could read but not understand Conrad's *Lord Jim*, and students who could not do simple lab procedures by reading the instructions and following the step-by-step diagrams. There are also many complains about students' ability to write. This is not surprising because there is a direct correlation between a person's reading ability and his or her writing ability.

One of the culprits in this lack of reading skills is "aliteracy." Aliteracy is generally defined as having the ability to read but lacking the desire to do so. Reading is a "use it or lose it" skill. People can become "intentionally illiterate" by failing to exercise their reading skills. Also, there are many levels of literacy. Simply saying someone can "read" is all but meaningless. However many students do not know what they do not know when it comes to reading. Using Mortimer Adler's terminology, the large majority of people read at a basic "entertainment" level. Reading at this level does little to educate the reader. To be truly educated requires one to read well above the "entertainment" level--to read at Adler's fourth and highest level, the "syntopical or comparative" level. At this level, the readers are able to read and analyze two or more works with different perspectives or even contrary positions and are able to form their own well-informed judgment. This oftentimes requires consulting reference tools to ensure accurate understanding of the authors' intended meanings. We seem to be seeing the results of students who have not been reading increasingly challenging materials over the course of their education and are stuck at the entertainment level.

Based on many indicators, fewer and fewer people read, especially among our younger people. Fewer than 50% of households in the USA subscribe to any newspapers, magazines or newsletters. A runaway bestseller is now defined as one that sells 50,000 copies to a population of potential readers of over 200 million people. Book titles are no longer part of our definition of "popular culture." There is not a common body of "classic" literature shared among people today.

Added to these trends are concerns about the content of the things being read. For example, while the number of magazine titles published has increased, many of these do not contain much intellectually challenging content. Also the writing in many newspapers and magazines is being written for lower and lower reading levels and often is now written at the 4th grade reading level.

It is important to note that, while a recently popular topic, aliteracy is not new. The American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research held a conference, "Aliteracy: People Who Can Read But Won't," in 1982. The conference panel was concerned about the effect our declining language skills will have on our democratic way of life. They concluded that if aliteracy was not addressed quickly, we would wind up with a small literate elite who could control the country.

If we at WCU are to fulfill our mission of producing well-educated citizens, it seems apparent that we need to put renewed emphasis on the importance of reading. All evidence suggests that we can no longer assume that our students arrive on campus understanding this importance or come equipped with adequate reading skills. Every WCU course needs at some level to be a reading course. Teaching reading cannot be the sole purview of a tutoring center or a particular academic department. Students need to be taught how to read the literature of their chosen discipline. Textbooks need to challenge the students' reading ability and not simply be easy sources of facts. Library assignments need to require students to use multiple expository sources. Faculty need to explicitly model good reading behaviors to their students. All of this may require that the university develop ways to help faculty learn how to teach reading within the context of their courses. These would be similar to the efforts the university initiated to help faculty teach computing skills in their courses.

There are many things that can be done to incorporate reading in our curricula and to enhance the reading abilities of our students. However the first step will be to make a commitment to do so. Is the university ready take the obvious and yet, in today's world, the ironically bold step of declaring that to succeed at WCU a student needs to be able to read well?

The Faculty Project Team on Aliteracy is working on assessing the level of aliteracy on campus and developing ways to address the problem at WCU. If you would like to be involved, please contact Bil Stahl at Hunter Library.

Bil Stahl, Hunter Library

The opinions printed here belong solely to the authors and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the editorial staff or of the Faculty Center. If you would like to respond, e-mail Nienhuis by the 8th of the month.