

MINI-POSTER: READING EVOLUTION OR REVOLUTION?

EMERGING READING TRENDS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

Barry Cull ♦ UNB Libraries Instruction Committee Retreat ♦ June 23, 2009

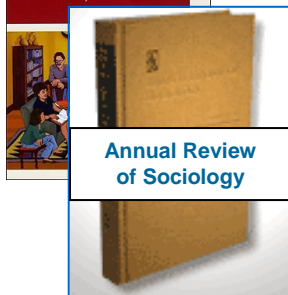
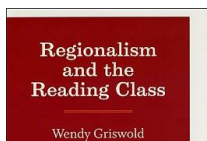
Do students entering university read? Do they *enjoy* reading? See the value of reading? Know how to read critically and analytically? Do they largely ignore the in-depth reading of books and other print sources for scanning laptop, cellphone, and iPod screens? How different would the answers to those questions be for graduating students? How should students' reading change over the course of their academic careers, and how might it change throughout their lifecourses? *The answers to those questions—and many others surrounding reading trends—should shape the teaching, spaces, and collections of academic libraries.*

At first glance, there appear to be generational, socioeconomic, and cultural dimensions of the societal reading trends which are evolving throughout the Western world. Add technology into the mix—specifically, the technology of near universal internet access—and the result is more revolutionary, as *suddenly everyone is reading differently than in the past.*

As part of my upcoming six-month sabbatical study, I will study the relevant literature of diverse disciplines—*sociology of culture, history of the book, cognitive neuroscience, literacy, education, and social policy*—as it pertains to emerging reading trends. I will also interview several leading international scholars from the aforementioned various disciplines, including those below. I will attempt to collate a picture of emerging trends, and some of the implications for libraries, especially academic libraries. Following this extensive secondary research, I will consider the potential need for additional primary research on reading trends and libraries.

Wendy Griswold @ Northwestern U. / U. of Oslo – **Sociology of Culture**

Professor of Sociology; Bergen Evans Professor of Humanities



♦ *An emerging “reading class”*

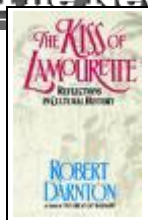
Griswold points out that reading only became routine over the past three centuries, and only in North-Western Europe, North America, and Japan. Today, she argues, the globalized electronic culture actually encourages reading cultures, particularly regional literature. However, reading by occasional readers is declining. While at the same time, frequent readers continue to read as they always have. She calls this the “reading class”—a group composed of highly educated cultural participants who are also a “communications elite”, and who she predicts will make up one-quarter to one-third of the population in the West and Japan.

“We are now seeing such reading return to its former social base: a self-perpetuating minority that we shall call the reading class....Unlike in the past, most people in the developed world will be capable of reading, and will in fact read as part of their jobs, online activities, and the daily business of living.

Only a minority, however, will read books on a regular basis....The reading class will remain strong, but the day of the reading culture is over.”

Robert Darnton @ Harvard – **History of the Book**

Carl H. Pforzheimer University Professor; Harvard University Library Director

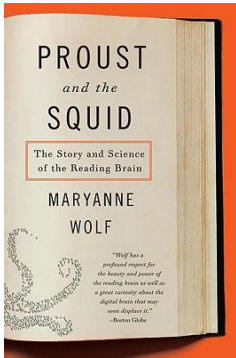


♦ *The history & future of books*

“....reading has changed the course of history—Luther’s reading of Paul, Marx’s reading of Hegel, Mao’s reading of Marx. Those points stand out in a deeper, vaster process—man’s unending effort to find meaning in the world around him and within himself.”

“To digitize collections and sell [Google Books] in ways that fail to guarantee wide access wouldturn the Internet into an instrument for privatizing knowledge that belongs in the public sphere.... Here is a proposal that could result in the world’s largest library.... Yet this is also a tipping point in the development of what we call the information society.”

Maryanne Wolf @ Tufts – Cognitive Neuroscience / Child Development
Center for Reading and Language Research Director; John DiBiaggio Professor of Citizenship and Public Service



◆ *A look forward to the digital brain that may be replacing the reading brain*

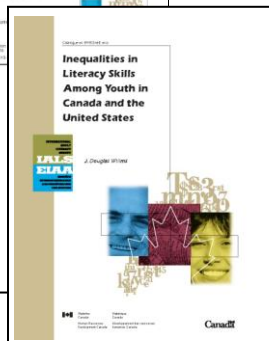
Wolf explains that as a child begins to learn to read, his highly plastic brain changes. The milliseconds of time required in order for his brain to decipher and decode words, which eventually enable him to become a fluent comprehending reader, indicates the gift of the reading brain to our species—time to think. Over the past 6,000 years of the “natural history” of reading during which literacy emerged, reading has fundamentally contributed to new forms of thought.

*“I fear that many of our children are in danger of becoming just what Socrates warned us against—a society of decoders of information, whose **false sense of knowing** distracts from a deeper development of their intellectual potential.... The mysterious, invisible gift of **time to think beyond** is the reading brain’s greatest achievement: these built in milliseconds form the basis of our ability to propel knowledge, to ponder virtue, and to articulate what was once inexpressible.”*

Doug Willms @ UNB – Education, Literacy, and Social Policy
Professor and Director of the Canadian Research Institute for Social Policy (CRISP); Canada Research Chair in Human Development

◆ *International, Canadian, and New Brunswick statistics on literacy, and social policy implications*

According to Statistics Canada, while 60 percent of Canadian adults have completed postsecondary education, 48 percent of Canadian adults perform below the desired level of competence for coping with the increasing demands of the emerging “knowledge economy”.



“Youth in Canada and the United States do not fare well in their quantitative skills compared with their European counterparts.”

*“The transition from “learning-to-read” to “reading-to-learn”, which for most children should occur during the second or third grade, is critical.... However, **literacy is not a static commodity that is acquired in youth and maintained throughout life**. Some groups of individuals find a way to add to their level of skill over their adult lives, while others manage to maintain their skill level and others lose skill.... [there is] **significant literacy loss in adulthood**, loss that would seem to be concentrated in adults from lower socio-economic backgrounds.”*

Following my research on reading trends, and a consideration of what the above scholars (and perhaps a few others) may have to say about the role of academic librarians, I will contemplate two specific questions:

- In our information literacy instruction, do we appropriately engage both beginning and advanced students, as well as all those who find themselves somewhere in between on the “critical reading” skill-level continuum?
- Do our spaces, services, and collections purposefully encourage students to move from superficial reading to in-depth study and deep reading, or “thinking beyond”, as Maryanne Wolf describes it?