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Let Them Read Trash!

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let them read **trash!**

the power of choice: the power of pleasure

A classroom teacher for fifteen years, Dr. Jeffrey Wilhelm is currently Distinguished Professor of English Education at Boise State University. He is the founding director of the Maine Writing Project and the Boise State Writing Project. He has authored or co-authored 32 books about literacy teaching and learning.

The following article is an adaptation of the Prestige Lecture presented at the University of Canterbury on March 3, 2015. It is based on the research reported in his book *Reading Unbound: Why Kids Need to Read what They Want – and Why We Should Let Them* (Scholastic, 2014)

For the last 32 years I've run a free reading program for students, and as a result have had numerous conversations with worried parents, administrators, and other teachers about the value of the books that students most wanted to read and that they read – and discussed - with the greatest joy and passion. I confess that I've sometimes worried about many of the texts my students gravitated towards and thought they might be “trash” – a worry I heard many times from other adults as well. I worry, for example, about young women reading romances (will it perpetuate male hegemony?) and my young men's love of horror and dystopias (will it perpetuate hopelessness or violence?).

But I also confess my amazement at the high engagement and even zeal displayed by many of these readers, readers who would spend hours upon hours reading their freely chosen books outside school even as they often rejected the reading they were asked to do inside school. I wondered what these students were getting from their out-of-school reading.

So I decided to explore this question.

Reading Unbound: Why Kids Need to Read What They Want—and Why We Should Let Them (2014) is a report of what I learned.

The findings from this study focused on the nature and variety of pleasure young readers took from genres often marginalized by schools, genres like romance, vampire stories, horror, dystopian fiction, and fantasy. My co-researcher, Michael Smith, and I wanted to understand why these readers pursue the reading agendas that they do, why they choose the specific genres they love, and what they get out of their reading of such texts. We found that these genres brought these readers five distinct kinds of pleasure: the pleasure of play, the pleasure of work, the pleasure of inner work, intellectual pleasure, and social pleasure. These same pleasures were rarely present in their required school reading and these readers drew a sharp line between their “real reading” and their school reading. Further, we found that in all cases in our study, this free choice reading served what we would define as healthy human development and the navigation of current life challenges.

In this article, I’ll touch on all five pleasures but focus more specifically on two that seem especially important and often neglected by school: immersive play pleasure and inner work pleasure.

Immersive play pleasure

Our informants self-identified as highly engaged readers of texts often considered to be “trash” or “subliterature”, i.e. books that are marginalized in school and the wider culture. These books always allowed them the previously noted five kinds of pleasure. This was in contrast to their experience with school reading, where they often experienced none of these pleasures, and rarely experienced more than one or two.

The first of these pleasures are what we, following John Dewey (1913), called “play” or “immersive pleasure”. This is the pleasure you get from living

through a story and getting totally lost in a book. Dewey described this kind of pleasure as that “which puts itself forth with no thought of anything beyond” (13). As Rebecca, one of the adolescents in our study, said, “The characters become like your friends. And they’re so much in your lives that they’re like your best friends.”

Here’s a slight twist. This pleasure was typically experienced as total enjoyment, BUT not always. In some cases, this pleasure was a kind of distressing and unsettling engagement – a sense of being totally engaged by something that was challenging, that was making you think hard and outgrow yourself. This latter experience reminded us of Kafka’s injunction that we need books that “smash the frozen seas within”.

The famous French literary theorist Roland Barthes (1975) calls this first experience of total enjoyment *plaisir* and the second pleasure of being unsettled *bliss*.

The text of pleasure, he says, “contents, fills, grants euphoria: the text that comes from one’s culture and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable practice of reading”. The text of bliss, on the other hand, “imposes a state of loss. . . , unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language. (p. 14)

One of our most significant findings is that the immersive pleasure of play was not only incidental to engaged reading, it was absolutely necessary to it, and pre-requisite to experiencing all the other pleasures and benefits of reading. So our students need to read books and engage in activities associated with their reading that immediately and sustainably provide this kind of immersive pleasure, whether of *plaisir* or *bliss*.

Teaching Implication: Fostering the Pleasure of Play

- Dramatic techniques like revolving role play, in-role writing, good angel/bad angel, hot seating, and alter ego encourage and reward all students for entering story worlds in the way these committed readers do.
- What do you do or could you do to promote the prerequisite pleasure of play for reading/writing in your classroom?

The pleasure of work

What it is: Using reading as a tool to get something functional done.

Illustrative quotes from dystopia readers:

“[Dystopias] help us see what is necessary to creating a better, fairer, happier world.”

“[Dystopias] show you how you have to be, how you have to be strong, if you are going to part of the solution instead of the problem.”

Teaching implication: Fostering Work Pleasure

- Frame texts and units as inquiry: as a problem to be solved by using essential questions (see Wilhelm, *Engaging Readers and Writers with Inquiry*)
- Work towards culminating projects – service and social action
- Drama work: Hotseating, mantle of the expert
- What do you do/could you do to promote the pleasure of work?

The pleasure of inner work

Perhaps our most striking finding during the study was that the participants in our study drew pleasure, in all cases, from using their reading to help them deal on the psychological level with current life changes, and from using their reading experience to move towards becoming the kind of people they wanted to become, a kind of pleasure we termed “inner work”. According to the psychologist Robert Johnson (1986), “inner work is the effort by which we gain an awareness of the deeper layers of consciousness within us and move to an integration of the total self – to actualizing the full possibilities of our human potential” (20). Helen gave a typical response exhibiting this kind of inner work: “Well, I learn about myself through books when I imagine myself in the different situations . . . you can help yourself change in that way, and when you really admire a character in a book who’s really brave and stuff, you kind of can idolize them and become more like them. *So it’s not really learning about yourself, it’s learning about what you could be . . .*”

The dystopian readers engaged in a kind of inner work that depth psychologists would call dealing with individual and cultural shadows of, as Jazzy put it: “bad adult values and continued adult screw-ups”. Exploring these shadows encouraged them to know “who to root for” as well as “how to rebel and resist” in highly conscious ways.

“Authors take a wrongness in the world and exaggerate it and show what could happen if things continued that way – and it would be a disservice to the author if you don’t try to understand that problem and where it came from and what you could do about it.”

Dystopias are about “what is necessary to creating a better, fairer and happier world.”

Fostering Inner Work Pleasure

- Imaginative rehearsals for living: inquiry geared towards current and future action, inquiry for service, drama as characters in dilemmas or agents (good angel) trying to help a character in distress or dilemma, as authors making choices, writing for the future/ to a future self, corresponding with characters and authors, cultivating a spirit of transfer
- What do you do/could you do to promote the pleasure of inner work?

Intellectual Pleasure

What it is: Figuring things out as intellectual puzzles.

Illustrative quotes: Alex: “[Reading’s] like being a detective almost. It’s taking the evidence and the information and everything that’s happened, taking all that and putting it together. Processing through it and seeing what ends connect, and then finding, once all those ends connect, what that last piece is.”

Jazzy: “[Dystopia] authors take a wrongness in the world and exaggerate it and show what could happen if things continued that way – and it would be a disservice to the author if you don’t try to understand that problem and where it came from and what you could do about it.”

Teaching implication: Fostering intellectual pleasure

Read a book for the first time along with your students – figure it out along with them – model your fits and starts and problems through think alouds and discussion

Pair an assigned reading with self-selected reading from a list, or a free reading choice that pertains to the topic.

Frame units as inquiry with essential questions, as a problem to be solved

Teach students how to generate their own questions for discussion and sharing, using techniques like QtA and QAR. Discussion structures like Socratic Seminar that make it clear there is no teacherly agenda to fulfill as far as topics or insights to achieve (this is consistent with the Core which focuses on strategies over content)

Social Pleasure

What it is: The joy of relating, usually over time, to authors; characters; other readers; and of affiliating with groups of readers of your favourite genre; and of staking one’s identity

Illustrative quotes: Jazzy: “I’m part of a cultural club that grew up with Harry Potter. It gave me a sense of belonging. I loved wondering what I thought was going to happen. Talking to my friends about that. Aligning myself with characters. Waiting so impatiently for the next book. No other group of kids will have that experience again. It kind of marks you as when you grew up and bonds you with other people your age.”

Bennie: “I like to think of myself as a Harry Potter reader. As someone who has imagination and is a good friend. Who admires characters and people like Hermione for her friendship and Harry for his courage. Who reads . . . Books that help you with the challenges you are facing.”

Teaching implication: Fostering social pleasure

Be a fellow reader with students

Post on your door what you are reading – include children’s and YA books and popular culture materials of interest to students

Read one of your students’ favourite books.

Foster peer discussion of reading and response in pairs, triads, small groups, literature circles, book clubs, etc.

Do group projects with reading that are then shared: videos, PSAs, dramas, visual displays, talk shows, etc.

Have a free reading program; promote books through booktalks, online reviews, etc.

What do you do/could you do to promote more social pleasure in your classroom?

Conclusion

Our takeaway: when given choice, kids tend to “read what they need” on very human, developmental, and psychological levels. Our informants gravitated towards books that challenged them to navigate current life challenges – both personal and social – and to be better or more whole people, that assisted them to outgrow themselves, to consider new perspectives, to see new possibilities in themselves and the world.

Our research has convinced us that teachers need to grant more respect to student choices. We were surprised by the story worlds our informants delighted in inhabiting. We were surprised by how they used books of which we had been dismissive to help them along their life journeys. We came away from our work resolved to try to understand why kids choose to read what they choose to read, and to take the time to ask them about their passions and engagement. Our study showed us that if you ask kids about their reading, you will often be surprised by their answers, and often pleasantly or even profoundly so.

And finally, our work convinces us that we need to reflect on and model our own pleasure in reading. As professionals, we need to think and share with each other our own successes with getting our students to fall in love with books. Because, after all, it is only through love that all things are possible – including developing lifelong readers who take joy and great transformative benefit from their reading.

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Question 1.

You talk about books - are you including magazines, so what about the boys who only read *Trucker Weekly* or *Surfing mags*? This has been a common question here recently.

Prof Wilhelm

No, we only studied books - and books from genres that parents/teachers/news commentators tend to disapprove of: romance, horror, vampire, dystopia and fantasy - we also studied graphic novels from these genres.

In our boys study (*Reading don't Fix no Chevys*) we did study the reading of websites, magazines, all nonfiction reading and found that boys tend to look for an immediate functional value and application for their reading which is more readily and obviously rewarded by nonfiction.

Question 2.

The first pleasure you talk about is the kind of pleasure

“which puts itself forth with no thought of anything beyond”

Does this mean that it should be clear to students that they won't have to write about it, study it, if they don't want to, because if they have to go back and analyse etc that will spoil the play pleasure?

Prof Wilhelm

No, I don't think so. I think what it means is that they have to enjoy the reading, get immersed in the story, do drama around it - etc. Then and only then will they have an experience that they can actually reflect on and think with and share - which makes all the other pleasures available.

Question 3.

If as you say the immersive pleasure of play was not only incidental to engaged reading, it was absolutely necessary to it, and pre-requisite to experiencing all the other pleasures and benefits of reading then does this mean that teachers are wasting their time getting students to study in-depth a book that they haven't enjoyed as play?

Prof Wilhelm

Our data makes us think so - that without the immersive power of play pleasure the other pleasures did not come into play. Now, we studied students' free choice reading, but I would feel confident to say that even with required reading it is going to be very difficult to achieve the other pleasures without play pleasure - and I feel totally confident in saying that we underestimate and underemphasize the power of play and immersive play pleasure in schools. Vygotsky has a famous quote in which he says: the child in play is always a head taller than

herself” which means that when we play, we are playing with being more competent, more powerful, more knowledgeable - i.e. that we are in our zone of proximal development.

Question 4.

Would you have censorship? e.g. I know of schools that would not allow “50 Shades of Gray”.

Prof Wilhelm

Yes, I think there are some books that are unhealthy - but I’m drawing the line in a different place than I did - I was surprised by how the books our informants read were so helpful to them in healthy ways for navigating their current life concerns and challenges. So, I’d say that if a book makes me uncomfortable I would ask students what they get out of it and listen carefully - as we did in the study. I personally don’t let kids choose books with what I consider to be gratuitous sex (like 50 shades) or gratuitous violence (like snuff books). They usually don’t push back but if they do, then I tell them I will listen to them and then be honest with my response. I can’t remember a case where I ended up counting a book in a free reading program that fit the gratuitous sex or violence frame, and I can’t remember being convinced otherwise by a student. But I hasten to add that it’s really important to have those kinds of conversations with kids. ∞

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