

Queensland University of Technology

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Why Don't Our Students Read?

Abstract:

As teachers of creative writing, it has become increasingly apparent to us, from classroom experience, anecdotal evidence, and from a review of previous research into reading habits, that the proportion of our students who are 'readers' is disconcertingly low. This paper will present a work-in-progress comment from an on-going study of the attitudes of creative writing students at undergraduate and postgraduate level. Both print and electronic material is taken into account when assessing fiction, nonfiction and literary reading habits. We also address student attitudes to reading, writing and other literary/cultural activities, and include results of a survey carried out this year, as well as strategies the Creative Writing Section at QUT is utilising to encourage reading among its students.

There are two kinds of people in the world, Ellie. The ones who watch TV and the ones who get things done. [1]

This paper presents preliminary findings of an ongoing study into the reading habits of creative writing students at QUT, in Brisbane. As such, it joins (as has been noted in a Griffith University Cultural Policy Paper of 1995 [2]) a surprisingly small number of studies of reading in comparable groups. There are many more studies of primary and secondary school students as 'readers', than studies of tertiary level students. This paper also takes the perspective that reading is an essential practice for anyone who wants to write. Indeed, at QUT, where we have been faced with increasing numbers of students who do not appear to be reading, we have taken to appending the cautionary motto 'You cannot be a writer without being a reader' to all our course outlines.

Even in the brave electronic age of the globalised 'new economy', reading remains the dominant mode of communication. It is a fact that, despite the invention of cyber-newscasters such as Annanova and sound responsive software, reading (and writing) text is the language of cyber-space.

The influential American body, the Associated Writing Programs, include in their statement 'Hallmarks of a Successful Undergraduate Program in Creative Writing' the confirmation that 'a writer must first become a voracious and expert reader before he or she can master a difficult art' [3] and in general, in the US the undergraduate programs place a stronger emphasis on the study of literature than the practice of craft. Despite this, Professor Lee Gutkind, reflecting on his experience with American students, told us in a recent interview: 'Wherever I travel, giving workshops and readings across the US and abroad, I am always amazed to discover how unfamiliar creative writing students are with creative writers.' [4]

A recent extensive study of the reading skills of over 2,000 students entering a United Kingdom Open University year showed that in an open entry undergraduate program, difficulty was experienced by a significant proportion of students in reading academic texts, and that this impacted negatively on student success. [5]

Characteristics of the group surveyed, the survey and the response

Of the 64 respondents to the survey, 50 were undergraduate students in the B.A. degree in Creative Writing from 1st, 2nd and 3rd year, 14 were postgraduate students undertaking Masters, Doctoral and Graduate Certificate study. There were four non-English speaking background International students. There were 45 females and 19 males, ranging in age from 17 to 60. The stated numbers of years at university ranged from 1 to 28, with most (80%) of undergraduates in their 1st, 2nd or 3rd years of university study.

Age in Years	UG 17-39 yrs	Age in Years	PG 22-66 yrs	Year of Course	UG	PG	Total yrs at uni (incl.this)	UG 1-6 yrs	PG 4-28 yrs
17-18	17			01	21	11	01	13	
19-20	15			02	20	03	02	19	
21-25	08	22-28	07	03	09		03	08	
26-29	02						04	05	3
30-39	08	32-38	03				05	03	4
		41-44	02				06	02	2
		55-60	02				08		1
							10+		4

[a blank indicates a 0 response]

The sample represents more than 50% of our 116 students [6] (55%). Though obviously no such study of 64 students can provide statistically meaningful answers to questions about Australian creative writing students in general, it will provide an interesting set of statistics to compare with, and feed into, other studies, while offering a snapshot of these students and their reading at this moment.

The high response rate reflected, we believe, students' commitment to their course, and we feel confident the large majority of students responded truthfully and conscientiously to the survey. Distributing the surveys also led to a number of individual discussions with students and some of the information gathered in these informal 'interviews' has been included below as indicated.

The survey was based around trying to find out students' involvement with the public literary culture, and their attitudes to reading and reading habits. The questions were asked in a format able to be readily analysed, with a balance of quantitative and qualitative items.

Why did you enrol in Creative Writing?

Our Creative Writing majors are all high achieving tertiary entrance students who could have chosen a vocational course from, for example, law or the health professions. Why, then, did they choose writing? The survey elicited the unequivocal response that most students (78%) enrolled in the course because they wanted to be writers. Why then aren't they 'readers'?

Responses to this question were short answer in type, which means they were not limited or guided by a set possibilities that we predicted. Half of the undergraduates mentioned that they enrolled in Creative Writing because they enjoyed writing, but only 6% (3 of the 50

undergrads) mentioned reading at all.

We do not believe any of our students to be functionally illiterate (due to the high entry scores required and the nature of the course). Anecdotal evidence suggests that only a handful have functional reading difficulties.

Almost 20% of undergraduates thought they were good writers, though no postgraduates stated this - a common pattern that may indicate different levels of maturity and awareness. Few undergraduates intended the course to improve their writing.

Why did you enrol in Creative Writing?	UG	UG%	PG	PG%
I want to be a writer	39	78	05	31
I enjoy writing*	25	50	04	25
I am a good writer	09	18		
I want to improve my writing	07	14	6	37.5
I need incentive / motivation / discipline	05	10	04	25
I like reading	02	04		
I love reading and studying literature	01	02		
Other career preparation - publishing, film	02	04		
Meet other like minded people	01	02	04	25
Return to uni / contrast to work			04	25

*students repeatedly used the phrase 'writing is my passion'

[These, as some other of the questions, elicit total responses in excess of 100% as students could give more than one answer]

When are students reading?

Only 40% of undergraduate students read 'for pleasure' more than once a week, with 20% only reading 'for pleasure' once a fortnight or less. However, 93% of postgraduate students read for pleasure 2-3 times a week or more.

I READ	Every day or almost every day			2-3 times a week			Once a week			Once a fortnight			Less than once a fortnight			Only very occasionally or never		
	UG	PG	tot	UG	PG	tot	UG	PG	tot	UG	PG	tot	UG	PG	tot	UG	PG	tot
for pleasure	12	07	19	08	6	14	18	01	19	06	00	06	04	00	04	00	00	00
to study	21	06	27	17	06	23	08	00	08	01	01	02	01	00	01	02	00	02
for work (not study)	08	10	18	06	02	08	06	01	07	02	00	02	02	01	03	26	00	26

With only 40% of undergraduate students are reading for study purposes more than once a week, the other interesting figure here is that 86% of postgraduates read in relation to their work 2-3 times a week or more. We can only speculate whether the disparities between younger and older students were a result of developmental difference alone, or whether they also reflected different secondary school curricula. Present Queensland secondary school English courses tend to emphasise 'expression' and creativity over reading, textual analysis and comprehension. This school privileging of 'expression' could well be problematic for

those of us educating tertiary students in both reading and in rigorous self-editing of creative work.

What are students reading?

I READ	Every day or almost every day		2-3 times a week		Once a week		Once a fortnight		Less than once a fortnight		Only very occasionally or never	
	UG	PG	UG	PG	UG	PG	UG	PG	UG	PG	UG	PG
books	18	07	16	05	10	00	00	00	01	00	05	00
magazines	07	06	16	03	12	02	03	01	06	01	04	00
newspapers	11	08	14	05	13	01	02	00	02	00	01	00
on the internet	15	03	11	05	09	02	05	01	03	00	02	00
textbooks/unit books	09	04	18	02	07	04	01	00	03	01	01	01

What are students currently reading?

The range of what students are reading is highly concentrated around fiction, novels and short stories, with a significant proportion of poetry, though with less than half reading poetry 'for pleasure'.

What are you reading at the moment?	UG	PG	TOTAL	TOTAL %
Novel	41	17	58	91
Short Stories	16	09	25	39
Poetry	12	04	16	25
Bio/Autobiography	11	02	13	20
Other Nonfiction*	06	07	13	20
Magazines	05	01	06	09
Self Help/Spiritual	02	01	03	04
Children's/Adolescent	01	01	02	03
History	02	00	02	03
Plays	01	00	01	1.5
How to Write Books	00	01	01	1.5

* includes reviews, essays, travel, popular science

What do you most often read FOR PLEASURE?	UG	PG	TOTAL	TOTAL %
Novel	23	04	27	42
Mazagine	08	02	10	16
Bio/Autobiography	11	04	15	24
Short Stories	05	01	06	09
Nonfiction*	02	04	06	09
Scripts	02	00	02	03
Saturday Paper/newspapers	01	01	02	03

Plays	01	00	01	1.5
Poetry	01	00	01	1.5
Children's/Adolescent	01	00	01	1.5
Music Lyrics	01	00	01	1.5

* includes history, travel, popular science

Attitudes to reading

Questioned in various ways throughout the survey about their personal attitude to reading, student responses were overwhelmingly positive. For instance, when asked a series of questions about how they valued reading and their books, 75% of respondents indicated it was true that 'I love books' and 77% that 'I love reading'. It seems that in terms of self-perception/construction, there is no lack of valuing reading or their books, although they will share them with friends

It is true to say that	true	%
I love books	48	75
I love reading	49	77
I can never throw away a book	38	58
I prefer not to lend my books	21	33

Asked under what circumstances they would read more, there was an overwhelming response that there was not enough time to read. There were a number of highly insightful responses about negotiating the time spent studying with living, and five students commenting that they used to read more when they were younger and had less pressing social lives and more time alone. Some students expressed feelings of guilt about their lack of reading and that they 'should read more' - interestingly though, these were some of the same students for whom the hours spent watching television were the highest. Many expressed the desire to read more, and that reading was 'wonderful' and 'important'. But somehow this is not being translated into reading.

Another part of the survey asked students about other leisure activities. On the whole students went to cafes, restaurants, hotels, live music venues and movies once a week or more, with other cultural activities (visiting museums, art galleries, live theatre, opera, ballet irregularly - less than once a fortnight). Visiting friends was on average at least once a week, and in many cases more than 2-3 times a week. The majority of students also undertake part-time and/or casual work, and from anecdotal evidence we know that many of our students work 20 or more hours in these jobs.

Watching TV was an activity inadvertently left out of the first copies of the survey, but when added, almost all (38 out of the smaller group of 40 undergraduate students) responded that they watched TV daily or almost every day, with most (31) watching 2-5 hours per day. Only four of this sample (10%) watched less than 2 hours per day and three (7.5%) claimed to watch 8-10 hours most days!

I GO TO	Every day or almost every day		2-3 times a week		Once a Week		Once a Fortnight		Less than once a fortnight		Only very occasionally or never	
	UG	PG	UG	PG	UG	PG	UG	PG	UG	PG	UG	PG
the movies	00	00	02	02	19	03	06	05	12	02	09	04

the theatre/ballet/opera	00	00	00	00	00	00	01	01	13	02	32	11
live music	00	00	00	00	05	01	08	01	14	02	18	08
pubs/hotels	00	00	01	00	10	02	10	01	08	00	19	07
cafes/restaurants	01	00	06	01	16	05	14	03	05	00	06	03
museums	00	00	00	00	00	00	03	01	14	04	31	09
art galleries	00	00	00	00	00	00	04	01	16	04	24	09
friends' places	03	00	14	03	20	02	02	06	03	00	04	02
the beach/country	00	00	00	00	07	07	02	09	05	23	07	
shopping	00	00	10	01	15	04	11	04	05	02	05	03

Library Visits

I GO TO	Every day or almost every day		2-3 times a week		Once a Week		Once a Fortnight		Less than once a fortnight		Only very occasionally or never	
	UG	PG	UG	PG	UG	PG	UG	PG	UG	PG	UG	PG
QUT Library	10	00	13	00	11	01	07	05	01	03	02	04
State Library	00	00	00	00	00	00	05	00	10	02	28	12
Local Library	00	01	03	00	03	01	09	03	09	00	21	09

Attitudes to writers and writing

Although 93% of students responded that they admired authors, 89% that they would like to be one, and that writers (82%) and books (93%) are influential, 86% felt that authors should be paid more and 42% that authors cannot make a decent living. Interestingly for this study, fewer students responded positively to enjoying writing (84%) than enjoying reading (95%).

It is true to say that	UG /50	PG /14	TOTAL /64	TOTAL /64 %
I admire authors	48	12	60	93
I would like to be a writer	46	11	57	89
Writers are respected members of society	38	09	47	73
Writers can influence society	47	12	59	92
Books are influential	48	12	60	93
Writers can change the world	32	08	40	62
Writers should be paid more	44	11	55	86
Authors cannot make a decent living	22	05	27	42

Title and author recognition

At a time when Oxford University is being accused of 'dumbing down' their English Literature courses by dropping the study of Anglo-Saxon and the compulsory study of Beowulf, it is interesting to attempt some gauging of what our students are, and have been, reading.

Lists of 111 book titles and 126 authors (some concocted for the purpose of validating honest responses to the survey) elicited a wide range of recognition among students. In general, the level of recognition for postgraduate students was (as could be expected) higher, but even among this group there were surprising omissions.

For undergraduate students only the following were recognised by 70% or more students. From highest to lowest percentages:

Bryce Courtney (46%), John Grisham (46), Nick Earls (44), Jeffrey Archer (43), David Malouf (39), Patricia Cornwell (39), Michael Crichton (38), Tom Clancy (38).

The Horse Whisperer (44%), The Power of One (43), Angela's Ashes (43), The Joy Luck Club (43), Snow Falling on Cedars (42), Picnic at Hanging Rock (42), Praise (42), The Firm (40), Zig-Zag Street (39), Circle of Friends (36), Hunt for Red October (36).

All these high-recognition titles are also films (and film titles), and some are what can be called 'film tie-ins', produced as books only after the film.

Less than 50% of undergraduate students recognised the following (and many other) what we believe to be high profile authors:

Patrick White (24%), Margaret Atwood (15), Gabriel Garcia Marquez (15), Sue Woolf (15), Gillian Mears (12), Drusilla Modjeska (12), Rosie Scott (11), AS Byatt (10), David Forster (9), Janet Frame (9), Christina Stead (8), Lily Brett (8), Robert Dessaix (7), Brian Castro (4), Amanda Lohrey (1).

Literary Culture

We also tried to ascertain readers' relationship to 'book culture' - how they acquired books, and their awareness of, and participation in, a 'literary community', as well as their communication with others about books and reading.

Have you ever attended a Writer's Festival?	UG	PG	TOTAL	How many times?	UG	PG
Yes	17	07	24	01	07	02
				02	05	01
				03	02	02
				04	02	00
				06	01	01
				10+	00	01
Are you a member of a writers' group?				How often do they meet?		
Yes	05	02	07	fortnightly	02	00
				monthly	02	02
				2-3 times a year	01	00
Are you a member of a reading group or a book club?				How often do they meet?		
Yes	07	01	08	fortnightly	05	01
				monthly	02	00

Book buying habits and reading

I GO TO	Every day or almost every day	2-3 times a week	Once a week	Once a fortnight	Less than once a fortnight	Only very occasionally or never

	UG	PG	UG	PG	UG	PG	UG	PG	UG	PG	UG	PG
bookshops	01	00	06	02	13	04	14	05	06	02	09	01

No. of books purchased per year	UG	PG	TOTAL	TOTAL%
0	01	01	02	03
1-5	20	00	20	31
6-10	06	02	08	12.5
11-25	15	05	20	31
40-50+	08	06	14	22

77% of students responded that they like to own the books they read, while 79% of postgraduate students stated they buy 11 or more books a year, and 54% of undergraduate students buy 10 or less books a year. Undergraduate students overwhelmingly (92%) believe they would buy more books if they were less expensive, and they had more time to read. However, book prices have not risen suddenly nor steeply. While 22% of students have made purchases over the Internet, only 14% overall had purchased books in this way and only 6% of undergraduates. On the question of the GST, less than 50% of students understand that the GST will make books more expensive, and more than 50% of undergraduate students have 'no idea'.

I would buy more books if	UG	PG	TOTAL	TOTAL%
they were cheaper	46	10	56	87.5
I had more time to read	46	10	56	87.5
I got to bookshops more often	17	03	20	31

I have purchased	UG	PG	TOTAL	TOTAL%
Anything on the internet	09	05	14	22
Books on the internet	03	06	09	14

The GST will make book	UG	PG	TOTAL	TOTAL%
cheaper	05	01	06	09
more expensive	18	12	30	47
no idea	27	01	28	44

Studying and reading

Although more students (46%) felt studying a book intensified the pleasure of reading (compared to the 20% who felt it destroyed this pleasure), 60% of undergraduate students confessed that they only read 'some' (not 'most' or 'hardly any') of the texts required in their units. 40% claimed to complete 'most' or 'all' of the reading. For postgraduates, however, this figure was quite different with 71% reading 'most' or 'all' of their set texts. Our School divides our reading lists into required and recommended reading, with the former designated the minimum reading necessary to successfully complete the unit.

Studying a book	UG	PG	TOTAL

destroys it for me	12	01	13
intensifies the pleasure of reading for me	26	04	30

I read	UG	PG	TOTAL
all the texts required in my uni units	07	02	09
most of the texts required in my uni units	13	08	21
some of the texts required in my uni units	21	02	23
hardly any of the texts required in my uni units	09	02	11

Family background, childhood and reading

Our students identify as coming from highly literate and reading backgrounds. 88% of students grew up in an environment with 'books everywhere' or 'lots of books'. Only 11% had 'some' or 'few' books and one person said they grew up with no books. Both parents generally read.

My mother reads	TOTAL / 64	My father reads	TOTAL / 64
newspapers	50	newspapers	57
magazines	53	magazines	34
books	56	books	46

We also asked students what their three favourite subjects were at school. As might have been predicted, English was most popular at both high and primary school levels, but the other subject choices reveal the importance of art, music and drama (creativity), history and social studies (story-telling and narrative) and languages (expression). The primary school 'wonder of the world' subjects (sciences and geography) do not lose most of their popularity in the more formal structure of secondary school (especially as Biology becomes a favourite of many).

	High				Primary			
Favourite subject	UG	PG	TOTAL	RANK	UG	PG	TOTAL	RANK
English	48*	11	59	01	38**	12	50	01
History	23	04	27	02	04	03	07	
Drama/Theatre	14	06	20	03	03		03	
Art	10	05	15	04	13	07	20	02
Sciences***	07	05	12	05	10	01	11	05
Languages	09	01	10	06	04	02	06	
Music	05	03	08		06	04	10	06
Geography	04	01	05		01	01	02	
Logic/Philosophy	02	02	04					
Maths	02	01	03		04	02	06	
Design	02		02					
Sport/PE	02		02		15	01	16	03
Social Studies	02		02		11	03	14	04
Legal Studies	02		02					

Film & TV		02	02					
Economics	01		01					
Religion					01		01	

* High School English includes Literature

** Primary School English including Reading, Writing, Literature, Composition

*** Biology, Chemistry, Physics

Students, like children who are read to, professed a liking for reading their favourite stories repeatedly.

I have favourite	UG	PG	TOTAL	TOTAL%
stories I read over and over	38	07	45	70
books I read over and over	38	09	47	73

Internet and reading

	UG	PG	TOTAL	TOTAL%
I have access to a computer at home	49	11	60	93
I have access to the Internet at home	34	09	43	67
I read on the INTERNET for study	44	11	55	86
I read on the INTERNET for pleasure	30	10	40	62

Students overwhelmingly have access to computers, with over 93% of students having a computer at home, and all QUT students having free access to on-campus computers with a 'free' Internet account per semester. While the high number of students who use the Internet for study purposes is perhaps not surprising (a number of courses actually include this as an assessment component), the numbers who also read on the Internet for pleasure (62% overall) is higher than we expected: 60% of undergraduates and 71% of postgraduates.

Future Strategies

1. The strategy of introducing students to local writers and their work has had some impact - those surveyed showed most recognition of authors Earls, MacGahan, Wilkins, Armano etc. We will continue to encourage students to attend the Brisbane Writer's Festival and will take each of the 2nd semester classes to the festival as part of their unit.

2. It seems difficult (given the number of students who admit to not reading the set reading) to 'legislate' more reading for students, but for the last two years we have included short answer exam questions that test simple knowledge of the books' plot/characters. For example, in 1998 we asked: 'What is the object that the narrator accidentally hits someone on the head with near the end of Zig-Zag Street'. Since the novel's cover displayed a shoe on a head, we thought most would get this one. But a high percentage answered 'a bread roll'. Interesting from a psycho-analytical perspective, but obviously a guess. In 1999, we apportioned marks for the right answer, and results improved dramatically. It seems making reading assessable is a necessary inducement.

3. Some discussion of time management could be possible, given most students said they would read more if they had more time, but then watch hours of TV daily.

4. We have been strategically buying what we think are 'student attractive' books for our library.

5. We have encouraged authors giving guest lectures to emphasise the books by other writers most influential/inspirational in their own writing and development as authors.

6. It is self-evident, as stated by Brian Cambourne in an important essay on literacy, that 'reading cannot be said to have taken place unless comprehension takes place' [7] We are asking students to record in their semester journals, brief reviews of novels etc they have read for pleasure during the semester.

7. We impress upon students that if they are going to find a publisher and a market for their own work, it can help to read the books that each publisher is choosing to invest money in.

Above all, we need to convince creative writing students that reading widely is one of the most valuable means they have to achieve success as a writer.

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Note

These 116 students are made up of 38 in first year, 30 in second year, 20 in third, 20 Graduate Certificate, 6 MA and 2 PhD. Return to article

Assoc. Professor Philip Neilsen is Discipline Head of Creative Writing Production at Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, and director of Postgraduate Studies. Philip has published 13 books including poetry, short stories and young adult fiction, and has just co-authored a young adult novel with Gary Crew. He has recently undertaken funded research into the reading habits of school children with Professor Adrian Ashman (University of Queensland). He was also a researcher for a Griffith University small ARC project into the reading habits of adult professionals.

Donna Lee Brien is Lecturer in Creative Writing at Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, and currently completing a PhD (in Creative Writing) on fictionalised biography at QUT. Published on biography, history and art history, Donna is currently writing a fictionalised biography of Mary Dean, wife of the infamous poisoner George Dean. Her biography of Edith and John Power, Recollection, is to be published later this year. Donna was a researcher on a Melbourne-based project on high school students, multiculturalism, reading habits and literacy.

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