

Voluntary Slow Reading: A Literature Review

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Slow reading is about reading at a reflective pace. The idea of reading more slowly may seem odd in a time of increasing demand for speed-reading of volumes of information. Certainly, it is often important to read quickly. Those who read slowly by nature admit to it only with a hanging head. Inquire a little further and the same reader will share a conviction that slow reading is an advantage, a pleasure when reading fiction and an aid to comprehension when deciphering a complex text.

Much is known about the problematic aspects of involuntary slow reading, but little is known about the voluntary practice of slow reading. A literature search was undertaken to collect material on Voluntary Slow Reading (VSR). The concept of VSR has not yet been identified in the literature, so the term was coined for this report. Related terms such as close reading and literary reading were used as starting points in the search. The search looked broadly across academic disciplines and cultural sources. The aim was not to gather all materials, but rather to find sufficient materials to describe the significant facets of VSR.

This report presents and discusses the result of the search. A first section looks at the academic and cultural sources that have shaped the concept of VSR. A second section summarizes empirical studies on VSR. Some are high quality studies or statistics, while others are more-or-less structured observations. The report concludes with a definition of VSR based on the search results.

The Concept of Voluntary Slow Reading

Bibliophagy and Slow Reading in Religion

The modern glut of information has people reading all day long, from menus to credit card bills, but this kind of reading is shallow and of brief duration, alternating quickly between competing stimuli. Levy (2001) contrasted that style of reading with the more contemplative style of deep reading. That deep reading has sacred and reverential qualities is no surprise, for books have their roots in the codex, first adopted by early Christian communities as a vehicle for the Bible.

Early allusions to slow reading in the Bible come in the form of bibliophagy, metaphors of consuming a book to extract its deeper meaning. Peterson (2006) noted three examples. Both Ezekiel and Jeremiah ate books by divine command. An angel tells St. John to eat a book, and when he does so it is metabolized into the book he writes, the *Book of Revelations*. In these passages, the individuals are commanded to eat the books -- it was not voluntary. The internalization of the text and its transformative power, symbolized by eating, comes up often in discussions of VSR. For example, Sullivan (2007) described reading as “a journey that changes us” (27) and recommended that religious ways of reading be revived in universities.

Sire (1978) discussed the relation between slow reading and religious belief in his book, *How to Read Slowly: A Christian Guide to Reading with the Mind*. The intended audience is Christians, but Sire acknowledged the practical content may have wider application. For example, he advised the reader to take the time to read a book’s preface and introduction, have a dictionary handy, and read with a pen in hand for notes. But the deeper purpose of the book is to teach the reader how to pick up on the worldview of the author to see if it squares with the Christianity. When analyzing non-fiction, the reader can apply philosophical questions, e.g., what is the author’s view on reality. When

analyzing fiction, the reader can examine how the plot, theme and characters add up to the author's vision of life. Biographical, historical and other information can provide context to a reading. The reader is advised to bring a clear self-understanding to the reading.

Two additional items have value to the more general concept of VSR. One, Sire recommended to "read at your normal rate – or more slowly" (49). The variability in reading rate is an ongoing theme in the discussion of VSR. It is not necessary to read as slow as possible at all times to get the benefits of VSR. Two, Sire distinguished reading for entertainment or information from reading for perspective, the slow reading approach that allows one to pick up on subtleties in the text and the writer's worldview. VSR is often characterized as a third way of reading.

Early References in Philosophy

A familiar quote by the philosopher, Bacon, also used the metaphor of book-eating in reference to slow reading:

Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested: that is, some books are to be read only in parts, others to be read, but not curiously, and some few to be read wholly, and with diligence and attention (2001).

The earliest explicit reference to the phrase "slow reading" appears to be in Nietzsche's preface to *Daybreak*: "It is not for nothing that one has been a philologist, perhaps one is a philologist still, that it to say, a teacher of slow reading" (1997, 5). Nietzsche viewed philology as a "connoisseurship of the word" (5) requiring the reader to take the time to read well.

There is clear overlap between religious and philosophical treatments of slow reading. Quite often, religious scholars refer to existential philosophers, especially Heidegger.

Pike (2004) noted Heidegger's view that "the literary work of art requires that we bring all of ourselves, our spiritual and moral faculties included, to the reading event" (161) and recommended it for studying biblical passages. Others draw lines between religious and philosophical knowledge, e.g., Smith (2004) discussed the limitations of aesthetic reading in spiritual development.

The practice of slow reading may not have any religious subtext. Hartman (1980) is a well-known advocate of slow reading, or 'close reading' as it is often called in philosophical and literary contexts. For Hartman, close reading is a technique that cuts through ideology. He quoted Ruskin, "if you read ten pages of a good book, letter by letter – that is to say, with real accuracy – you are forevermore in some measure an educated person" (173).

Close Reading in Literary Studies

The modern reader lives in an age of plenty. Sutherland (2006) observed that every week more novels are published than Samuel Johnson had to deal with in a decade. He considered the mind-boggling availability of books should everything go on-line, and the dilemma of how to choose between the good and bad ones. But the print book persists, and for good reason. "It is ... a lean-back, not a lean-forward apparatus – and human beings like nothing more than to relax while they read" (34). The reader is urged to slow down and accompany Sutherland in the rediscovery of the art of reading. There are limits to how fast we can read, asserted Sutherland. At some point, we have to return to a focus on quality.

Prose is a renowned author and teacher of literature. In *Reading Like a Writer* (2006), Prose provided a practical introduction to the art of close reading as a way to

learn to write. “I read closely, word by word, sentence by sentence, pondering each deceptively minor decision the writer had made” (3). We all begin as close readers, learning to read by listening word-by-word, phrase-by-phrase, to those reading to us. Stereotypes suggest that literary readers are among the elite, applying professional techniques not suited to pleasure reading. Not according to Prose. She tells of the plain fun she had tracing patterns and making connections in her reading at even a young age.

Prose’s book has been received enthusiastically. Crediting Prose, Grimes (2006) stated that the drudgery of reading as information processing only returns to “the sheer bliss of the childhood reading experience ... when time, mercifully, stands still.” Levin (2006) said that Prose has convinced him “to adapt the Slow Food movement to reading. How much one has read matters less than how well one has read.”

The term, ‘close reading’, has emerged out of philosophy and literary departments. Murray (1991) suggested that the practice is so pervasive an assignment at the university level it may be considered a synecdoche for the English essay. But there are diverse perspectives on close reading, both between and within departments. Miller (2002) and Cain (1996) distinguished two forms of slow reading – rhetorical reading that examines the language, and cultural studies that interrogate the way a work inculcates beliefs about class, race or gender relations. The New Criticism advocates close attention to text over external sources, and has variants between British and American cultures. Reader Response Criticism refers to a group of approaches that look at the reader’s subjective response rather than focusing exclusively on the text itself.

Reader Response Criticism ties in with the theme from religious studies discussed earlier that slow reading can change the reader. Miall & Kuiken (2002), for example,

examined how catharsis combines aesthetic and narrative feelings that modify the reader. Birkets (1994) claimed that “serious reading is above all an agency of self-making” (87). If slow reading can compel changes in a reader’s identity, questions must be asked about the ethical application of the practice, especially by teachers (see, for example, Rye, 2000).

The complexity of theoretical perspectives associated with close reading might be sufficient to ward off a reader curious about the practice for recreation. It is not uncommon for academics to protect their discipline with false austerity. Oz (1999) complained that the literati are doing what her sex education nurse did in her seventh grade – forget to tell the students that the practice is quite fun. “Only the pleasure of reading do they castrate -- just a bit -- so it doesn’t get in the way; so that we remember that literature is not playing games, and, in general, that life is no picnic” (14). To the extent that close reading is highly prescribed and aloof, it is not VSR. Stuffy attitudes about literature should not discourage readers from using any variation of close reading for their increased pleasure and comprehension.

Slow Reading and Democracy

Slow reading and democracy have been associated by a number of thinkers. Postman (1985) lamented the decline of the Age of Typography, which had its zenith in the 19th century. Postman linked it with the Age of Reason. He noted the character of mind of the ordinary citizen of the day, who could listen for hours on end to political orations clearly shaped by a culture favouring text. Speeches would be followed by equally literate and lengthy rebuttals. The citizens who took time for this process were the same ones working dawn to dusk farming the lands, yet squeezing in a little time to

read after hours. These people read with purpose, and were well equipped to shape their nation. The Age of Television, on the other hand, is characterized by entertainment designed to please the eye. It requires no literacy and no reflective mental processing. We evaluate ourselves through the eye of television, and judge our politicians through their showmanship. As Postman warned, reading books is important for developing rational thinking, character of mind and political astuteness. From this view, what is good in modern politics is sustained by the citizenry with the patience for serious reading.

In *Jihad vs. McWorld*, a prescient Barber (1996) described two polarizing cultures, each a danger to democracy; at least part of the difference hinges on the attitude toward books. McWorld is the West and its culture of movie books that have no civic or literary torso. In contrast, Jihad is an Islamic culture in which religious texts are at the heart. Reclaiming book culture in the West is an important step toward ameliorating the conflict between the two worlds.

Pullman (2004) argued that slow reading is needed to reinforce democracy in America. Part of its democratic nature is that the manner of reading is not determined by someone else: "we can skim, or we can read it slowly." And Hartman (1996) said, "Teaching slow reading is still important. Without it, 'democracy does not long prevail but succumbs to propaganda and demagoguery'" (386).

Slow Reading in The Slow Movement

After a pressured day in his world of advertising there seemed to be no solution to the problems thrashing around in the head of Sydney Piddington. In *The Special Joys of Super-Slow Reading* (1973), Piddington recounted his decision to relax by spending three hours on two chapters of a book, "I lost myself in the author's world, *living* his book.

And when I finally put it down, my mind was totally refreshed.” (157). Ironically, this article was published in *Reader’s Digest*. On the back flap was an advertisement for the magazine’s condensed books: “To every Miss, Mrs. And Ms. who has no time to read – READ THIS!” Piddington understood what his publishers did not, that slowing down is essential in the rush of modern culture.

Honoré (2004) is the author of the book, *In Praise of Slow: How a Worldwide Movement is Changing the Cult of Speed*. He documented the beginning of the Slow Movement with the creation of the Slow Food, an organization to protest fast food. The idea has been applied other areas, including slow housing, slow exercise, slow work, slow sex, and slow reading. Honoré’s interest in the Slow Movement began one day in an airport when he saw a book called *The One-Minute Bedtime Story*. At first it struck him as brilliant — the cure to his nightly tug-of-war with his son’s demands for more stories — then the absurdity of his fast lifestyle called him to his senses. The idea of the Slow Movement is not that everything should be done slowly as possible, but that our obsession with speed has turned into an addiction. “When you accelerate things that should not be accelerated, when you forget how to slow down, there is a price to pay.” Slow reading is one good technique.

The context of the Slow Movement helps clarify the voluntary aspect in VSR. People are choosing to read slowly as a form of relief from the seemingly unstoppable acceleration of our culture. As Jennings (2005) reported, people are living on the edge of exhaustion. “The price for constant speed is high, whether measured in money or human lives.” (12). Or as Kumar (cited in Ingle, 2004) said, “We are so busy all the time that we

have become human doings rather than human beings.” Both recommend slow reading as a good technique to slow down.

Waters (2007) declared a worldwide reading crisis resulting from our global push toward productivity. Young children are learning to read faster, skipping phonetics and diagramming sentences; these children will not grow up to read Milton. She predicted the end of graduate English literature programs:

There is something similar between a reading method that focuses primarily on the bottom-line meaning of a story in a novel and the economic emphasis on the bottom line that makes automobile manufacturers speed up assembly lines.

She advised re-introducing time into reading, “People are trying slow eating. Why not slow reading?”

Locality and Slow Reading

The Slow Movement brings a new attitude to food and reading, a link that was made earlier with regard to bibliophagy. The Slow Food movement provides a new angle on the meaning of slow reading with regard to locality, i.e., one’s specific location on the planet. One of the themes of the Slow Food movement is the preservation of local food traditions and ecosystems; slow also means staying close to home. Similarly, reading can be slow not just in a temporal sense but also in a spatial sense by choosing to read local stories and content by local writers.

Smith & MacKinnon (2007) wrote *The 100-Mile Diet*, a record of their efforts to eating only local foods for a one-year period. They talked about the traceability of their food: “They know exactly where their food comes from, and under what circumstances it was produced” (54-55). This autochthonous knowledge is often missing in our web-based information. Schools teach students to properly cite their sources, including those from

the web. But web-based material can change or vanish, and the sources can be quite obscure. It is not uncommon for people to forget an author's name, let alone know the context in which he or she wrote the book. Slow readers may choose to seek out local writers and materials, thereby bringing this circumstantial information to the forefront of the reading experience.

The local aspect of slow reading fits with Birkets' (1994) idea of vertical reading. The arrival of the printing press resulted in the production of far more books on a wider range of topics for many more people. It enabled what he calls horizontal reading, "a shift from intensive to extensive reading" (72). Horizontal reading takes us outward, laterally, to learn new ideas, whereas vertical reading takes us inward to learn more about what is at hand, that which is local.

Local writing is not necessarily better than global writing; it can often be worse. The global publishing industry serves a distillation function that filters out a lot of low quality material. It also filters out a lot of good and divergent voices that do not have sufficient market appeal. Many writers are discouraged trying to get published, and many publishers are equally frustrated, wishing the returns would allow them to take a risk on a new writer. The end result is the smothering of diversity. McChesney (1998) chronicled the change from regional media systems before the nineties to the global commercial media market by the dawn of the 21st century. He suggests that grassroots efforts at local media production would benefit from traditional publishing because it is cheaper than digital technology if produced in small quantities.¹ This method will naturally lead to

¹ There is an active community of letterpress enthusiasts and books arts programs. See for example, the Briar Press on-line at <http://www.briarpress.org/>.

diversification. Even the global media will come looking for this content when its audience wearies of the banal content of mass programming.

Studies of Voluntary Slow Reading

Literary Reading

A number of concerning statistics have recently been reported on literary reading in the United States. While literary works can be read quickly, they generally offer more of reading challenge than, say, reading an MSN message. Even an advanced reader might be compelled to slow down because of the material itself, e.g., Milton's *Paradise Lost*. There is a voluntary nature to the selection of materials in this case, and so offers some insight into VSR.

In 2004, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) released a report, *Reading at Risk*, a study that investigated literary reading trends in the United States. The study measured literary reading by asking Americans if “during the previous twelve months, they had read any novels, short stories, plays, or poetry in their leisure time (not for work or school)” (ix). It found that “literary reading in America is not only declining rapidly among all groups, but the rate of decline has accelerated, especially among the young” (vii). A follow-up report in 2007, *To Read or Not To Read*, showed a similar pattern for reading in general. Both reports note with concern that it is the literary readers who are more likely to participate in cultural and civic events. The disappearance of literary reading implies a loss of these positive social benefits.

In response to the reports, some critics, e.g., Kirschenbaum (2007), complained that the definition of reading was simplistic, failing to measure other widespread forms of reading taking place on computers and the Internet. Bauerlein, overseer of the 2004

report, in an interview with Williams (2005), discussed some additional studies that speak to the difference between on-line reading and literary reading of books. One survey indicated that only eleven percent of young people go on-line for information; it is usually for entertainment. Another study showed that most Web users only scan pages (see additional discussion in the section on Media Studies). Bauerlein advised: “Like the slow food movement that’s catching on, we need a slow reading movement” (163).

A similar pattern of declining literary reading is described in *The Nation’s Report Card 2003*, put out by the US Department of Education. In this case, literary reading is defined as that which “involves the reader in exploring themes, events, characters, settings, plots, actions, and the language of literary works” (4). Material types included novels, short stories, poems, plays, legends, biographies, myths, and folktales. This definition of literary reading sounds very much like the practice of close reading, and the report explicitly distinguishes literary reading from reading for information or to perform a task; both items suggest a tight connection between literary reading and VSR.

Canadian figures do not confirm the same pattern. In 2005, Canadian Heritage released a report, *Reading and Buying Books for Pleasure*. The finding was that “reading for pleasure remains a solidly established and widespread habit with little or no change over the last 15 years” (4). Furthermore, respondents showed a marked preference for literary materials: “Seventy-nine per cent of the total sample have read at least one book belonging to the ‘literary’ genre and 44 per cent state they read mainly / most often literary works” (45). The pattern is not consistently different. A 2006 survey of household spending by Statistics Canada showed that spending on reading materials decreased by five percent since the previous year, though Alberta households spent eight

percent more on reading materials in 2005. Certainly it is important to continue watching these trends in the United States and Canada. The findings on literary reading will continue to be of importance toward the understanding of VSR.

Slow Reading in the Classroom

The heritage of VSR comes mainly from Religion, Philosophy and Literary Studies, and not without the occasional elitism of those disciplines, if only in perception. The influence of the Slow Movement has helped to shake off the stuffy airs of VSR. Another shake-up comes from teachers who have employed a diverse range of slow reading techniques with children in the classroom. The results have been positive, even according to the children. While a classroom setting is not entirely voluntary, the findings showed an increased pleasure in reading that continues beyond the classroom.

Metzger (1998) was concerned that her high-school students were not learning how to comprehend difficult text. After researching and experimenting with a number of techniques, Metzger found what she was looking for. She modified a pedagogy known as the Socratic Seminar, a focused discussion on the possible interpretations of a short piece of writing. Her modification entailed an outer circle that observes how an inner circle comprehends the text. “In other words, students focus on how they are reading as well as what they are reading.” She admitted that while the technique cannot make all students love reading, it does give them the skills to comprehend difficult text.

In an earlier version of Metzger’s technique, she led the discussion in the inner circle. She agreed with student feedback that it worked better when students led the discussion. Duke (1982) focuses explicitly on this theme, urging teachers to “encourage students to discover the meaning of a text for themselves, using the language of the text

and without unnecessary intervention of the teacher.” Examples include journal entries and oral reading. This view suggests that not only can slow reading be voluntary, but also should be voluntary for the best quality of reading experience. It was discussed earlier how VSR involves an internalization or personalization of the reading material. Applying a highly prescribed technique or forcing the reading in some way is contrary to the essence of slow reading; to some extent, it must be voluntary for it to be slow reading.

In contrast to the more open approaches, Elder and Paul (2004) proposed five levels of close reading, with each level detailing more sophisticated expectations for the student to respond to. Their article lists point-by-point assessment requirements. This imposed structure seems to take slow reading out of the voluntary realm. However, their target group is college students where more refined techniques might be required to teach higher levels of analysis. At younger ages, a less prescribed approach can be adopted. Gilbert & Temple (1994) suggested that elements of Mature Reading could be introduced as early as the second grade.

Rereading is a common technique used in close reading. Galef (1998) investigated rereading of narrative texts, including children’s literature. He examined how perspectives change after the first reading, and the distortions that emerge through repetition. In examining the gains and losses that go with re-reading, he observed that “Rereading has many joys but suspense is not one of them. Anticipation has replaced it.” Faust & Glenzer (2000) used re-reading in the classroom. The title of their article came from the testimony of their children: *I could read those parts over and over*. The students readily grasped that rereading literature is like watching movies and listening to music more than once.

Finally, another innovative approach is performance reading. Instead of having students read at their desks or have teachers read Hamlet's soliloquy, Lindblom (2005) used performance methods in English classes. "Performance happens when students look closely at a piece of text and use their voices and bodies to explore the subtleties of the author's words" (116). Lindblom called it "close reading on your feet" and the students loved it. Performance reading requires the performer to process the script in a deeper way, such as imagining how the character feels. It can be said that anything that extends the processing of a text is a type of VSR, and performance reading can be enjoyable at any age.

Reading Rate and Comprehension

Two significant measures related to VSR are reading rate and comprehension. Reading rate provides an objective measure of slow reading, and measures of comprehension point to the quality of a reading. In Carver's (1990) seminal work on reading theory he proposed five "gears" of reading: scanning, skimming, rauding, learning and memorizing. Unlike scanning or skimming, the third gear, "rauding" includes comprehension; it is what we normally think of as reading. (He calls it rauding because he views reading and auding – listening to words – as the same process). Learning and memorizing are slower and even more powerful than rauding. Carver found that most people read at a constant rate, their rauding rate, and it is best for comprehension of relatively easy material. When difficult material is encountered, individuals will temporarily shift down to slower rates of reading.

Carver's depiction of the fourth and fifth gears as learning and memorizing seems incomplete given the diverse techniques already discussed for VSR, including not only

word-by-word reading and rereading, but also contextual and structured analyses, selection of regional materials, group discussions and performance reading. Carver credited Yoakam (1928, cited in Carver, 13) who argued for four types of reading, with the fourth being called “careful reading, which included assimilative and analytic reading” (13). Yoakam’s types seem a better fit for slow reading and its multitude of methods.

Free Voluntary Reading and Avid Reading

Taking a look at modern literacy, Krashen (2004) argued that few people are completely unable to read and write. Rather, the modern crisis has to do with the steadily rising demands for literacy. “Although basic literacy has been on the increase for the last century, the demands for literacy have been rising faster” (x). People can read and write, just not well enough. The solution he recommended is free voluntary reading (FVR):

FVR means reading because you want to. No book report, no questions at the end of the chapter, and no looking up every vocabulary word. FVR reading means putting down a book you don’t like and choosing another one instead. It is the kind of reading highly literate people do all the time. (x)

It is contrasted with direct instruction involving skill-building and error correction, and his research showed that FVR yields better comprehension and writing skills.

Krashen does not talk about slow reading, but his focus on the voluntary aspect of reading is central to the idea. Let people read the way they want to read, and people will become better readers. Extrapolating this idea to reading rate, contrast the voluntary rate of slow reading to speed-reading in which readers are taught to read as fast as possible. Unlike Carver (discussed above), Nell (1988) showed that there is substantial rate variability during natural reading, with most-liked pages being read significantly slower.

Birkets (1994) considered control and adaptability essential to what he called deep reading.

Reports from avid readers also shed light on VSR. Ross, McKechnie & Rothbauer (2006) observed that “the most common image of the reader is the solitary person—intent scholar or entranced novel reader—who is ‘lost in a book.’” (5) Without subscribing to a stereotype, there is something in this image that captures the state of slow reader captivated by a text. VSR is often characterized as a consuming activity; recall the earlier discussion on bibliophagy in which a deep internalization of the text occurs. Reports from avid readers give the same impression, with readers stating that the experience gives them “a much greater internal world” (166). Citing Holland, “a reader responds to a literary work by assimilating it into his own psychological processes” (166).

It would be a mistake to think the benefits of VSR stop inside the mind of the reader. Recall the earlier finds on how literary readers tend to be the most civically engaged. Avid readers give similar reports. They find that reading gives them “a larger understanding of the world” (166).

Media Studies and Slow Reading

Nielsen (1997) performed a study entitled, *How Users Read on the Web*. The first sentence in the report is, “They don’t” (pointed out by Bauerlein; see the discussion under Literary Reading). Seventy-nine percent of their test users always scanned the page, picking out words and sentences rather than reading word by word. Scanning is the antithesis of slow reading.

Reading on-line is different from reading print, and in general print seems better suited to slow reading. It is the very nature of hypertext to point the reader away from the

page currently being read, distracting the reader from an in-depth reading that is associated with VSR. Carusi (2006) compared the reading of hypertext to linear literary text. The “binding” of hypertext is the link by which “the reader creates his or her own path through the text and, in so doing, co-creates the text” (167). A traditional book assumes a whole, which will be reconstructed through reading. This second kind of reading assumes a linear recreation of the author’s thought, allowing the reading to discover unexpected ideas rather than just reinforcing the ones they brought to the reading.

While it seems easy to be critical of the effect of on-line reading on VSR, some findings suggest the Web can be helpful with slow reading. When the literature anthologies did not arrive for Webb’s (2007) classroom, he turned to the Internet. There he found a wealth of classic and contemporary e-texts. These resources suggested new ways of teaching and learning the traditional skills of close reading and critical analysis. Students created blogs of poems, compared version of *The Odyssey*, and remixed the structure of text to question its cultural and historical context.

Revisiting the theme of locality from the Slow movement, the Web and computer technology provide micropublishing opportunities for localized expression. Dupuy & McQuillan (1997) found that second/foreign language students were discouraged from reading by the lack of materials at an adult level. Using desktop publishing techniques, they created about 400 books to be kept for other students.

At the *Reader’s Advisor On-line*, Cords (2007) observed that literary blogs “bring a refreshing air of regional pride to the business”. She says, “Anything I want to know about the state of Canadian publishing, which is emphatically not a hot topic here in the

States, I can pick up at BookNinja” and “The Bookslut blog gives off a whiff of Chicago.” Literary blogs, with their low costs of production, can provide regional promotion of local writers stories where mainstream publishers have not been able to do so.

Explanations from Psychology and Neurophysiology

Much of the material presented so far has been more descriptive than explanatory of slow reading. This is not surprising given the early stage of the research on the subject. However, a few studies were found that begin to provide psychological and neurophysiological reasons for why people read slowly.

Slow reading techniques have had some laboratory investigation. Hyönä & Nurminen (2006) found that adult readers are aware of both their reading speed, lookback and rereading behaviour. Looking back was positively correlated with recall of the text. That is, slow reading behaviours are a deliberate cognitive strategy used to improve the reading experience. (Raney & Rayner (1995) suggested further use of rereading to investigate higher-level brain functions, e.g., rereading time as a measure of comprehension.)

In a popular book on the subject of introversion, Laney (2002) referred to the brain research of Johnson et al (1999). Johnson’s team mapped differences in brain activity for the personality dimension of introversion and extraversion. At the one end of the dimension are extraverts, described as “gregarious, socially active, cheerful, assertive, and easily excitable”. At the other end are introverts, tending toward reclusion and “preferring books” to other people. The brain activity of introverts was found to be associated with increased blood flow in the frontal lobes and the anterior thalamus. Laney

explained that introverts have more blood flow to the brain; it follows a different path and engages parts of the brain involved with remembering, problem solving, and planning. Introverts use the neurotransmitter, acetylcholine, which stimulates a good feeling when thinking or feeling. It is no wonder that introverts spend more time reading.

In an account of the history and biology of reading, Wolf (2007) remarked that it is not the neglect of reading that has to be explained but the fact that we read at all. Reading is too recent a human activity for our genes to have coded for it. Instead our plastic brains repurpose circuitry that evolved for other tasks. Perhaps evolution will make us faster readers, but Wolf disagrees with futurists who think that acceleration is always positive:

In music, in poetry, and in life, the rest, the pause, the slow movements are essential to comprehending the whole. Indeed, there are “delay neurons” whose sole function is to slow neuronal transmission by other neurons for milliseconds (213-214).

Our brains have evolved to use slowness as part of our overall information processing experience. Slowness may be exactly what is required to make the most of reading.

Conclusion

Definition

Having reviewed and discussed the search results, a grounded definition of VSR can be stated. Some facets of VSR can also be asserted.

Voluntary slow reading (VSR) refers to freely chosen practices that reduce the rate of reading to increase the pleasure and comprehension of reading. Slow reading is a third way of reading, not just for information or entertainment. It involves a deep internalization of a text leading to changes in the reader. The rate of reading is variable; some readers will slow down only for selected passages. There are many approaches to slow reading, including, among others: word-by-word analyses; reading with a pen or

dictionary in hand; and structured analyses of plot, theme, and/or context. There is a preference for print over digital texts. The benefits of slow reading can be enjoyed by readers of any age. Slow reading may be social in nature, e.g., group discussions, and leads to increased civic participation.

Future Research

The search results presented here are considered of sufficient range to reflect the facets of VSR. A cursory analysis of these materials has been provided. In-depth analyses should be considered in the future, along with other materials from both academic, cultural and popular sources.

The discussion here suggests a number of avenues for research in the area of VSR. First, some explanation must be given for why literary reading holds a steady pattern in Canada while it declines in the United States. Second, if print is preferable for reading literary materials then there are implications for the publishing world. Publishers do not generally release full-text books on-line for free; they often release part of the book on-line and then expect users to purchase either the on-line or print version. But if users will consistently seek out the print version, then free full-text versions should have no impact on sales; in fact, it should increase the findability and thus the sales of these materials. Third, the Slow Movement's theme of locality may offer other angles to explore. It was discussed how reading can be localized geographically, but perhaps it can also be localized psychologically as well, with some materials being of more relevance to one individual than another. There is a fair body of literature in the area of bibliotherapy, a practice involving the selection of materials for therapeutic purposes. The process often

involves emotional identification with reading material, and thoughtful discussion with a professional; as such it is a type of slow reading. There is much to be learned.

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