

Students are apathetic readers, TA concludes

After conducting an informal survey of the leisure reading habits of 38 York students, teaching assistant P.A. Dutil concluded that students' inability to achieve competent writing skills is directly correlated to a dearth of stimulating reading material in their schedules.

Not too long ago, "can students write?" was the question York University professors tried to answer. The response was negative, and so the Writing Workshop was established to help needy students. Unfortunately, the problem has not been entirely resolved.

The Workshop has done admirable work, but many people are wondering if the root of the problem has been attacked. University teachers, especially those in the social sciences, are now trying to understand why students retain so little of what they are taught. Many people, those who assign book reviews in particular, are wondering if York Students can read.

In the course I have helped to teach over the last three years (History 2510.06: Canada in the Twentieth Century), many people excelled in the work assigned, but, sadly, too many seemed content to earn a good grade without expending much effort. It was evident that whatever inspired students to take History 2510 in the fall had been swept away by more than the icy winds of winter. That impression was repeatedly confirmed when reading final exams. The lack of knowledge and poor understanding of Canadian history manifested in those papers, despite a year of study, was disconcerting.

The lecturers certainly could not be blamed. There is no doubt that students of History 2510 have been among the best served in Canada as far as professors are concerned. Similarly, teaching assistants could hardly be reproached as they have few contact-hours with their overcrowded classes. Because the best of learning is generally self-taught through endless hours of reading and reflection, the reading lists were re-examined.

Sensitive to the fact that students did not seem to absorb much of what they were assigned, History 2510's successive course directors reduced the reading load. In the academic year 1983-84, for example, students were assigned three substantial scholarly books, one collection of over 20

articles and a textbook. Last year, students read one textbook, one scholarly book, a small collection of historical tracts, and 10 articles.

It was the good intention of the course directors to diminish the reading load so that students would invest more time in what they actually had to study. Even written assignments were reduced by a third.

Unfortunately, it could hardly be maintained that students in 1985-86 understood the nature of Canada's 20th century any better than previous students in the course. Bad writing was usually blamed for poor performances.

It was through reading hundreds of book reviews that I came to suspect that, unlike the bookworms who teach at York, most undergraduates did not feel comfortable with the written word. This year, in order to understand my 38 students better I polled their non-academic reading habits and found interesting answers.

It was clear that the students of my class were not avid readers. While 86.8 percent of the students admitted to "enjoying reading generally" only a third of them considered reading to be a hobby. When students were asked to estimate the time spent reading, their answers revealed that they read a little more than 30 minutes per day on average, not including university material.

Students read little non-fiction on their own time. On average, respondents reported reading 2.4 foreign and 3.6 Canadian non-fiction books per year. Fiction was far more popular, with students claiming to read 8.4 foreign books of fiction and, surprisingly, 6.0 Canadian novels a year.

Taken together, these statistics may be considered somewhat impressive as they amount to over 20 books per year, but it must be noted that no demand was made for titles. Fiction books run the gamut from Shakespeare to monthly Harlequin Romances, and non-fiction can include everything from Pietro Redondi's scholarly biography of Galileo to the latest car repair manual.

Although students demonstrated some willingness to read books, newspapers and magazines seemed to offer less enticement to read. Newsmagazines published on a weekly basis had little appeal. Students polled said that they read .7 of a foreign newsmagazine per month and .5 of a Canadian newsmagazine per month. In real terms, this means that the average student reads less than one issue of *Time* or *Newsweek* per month and only half of *Maclean's*, for example.

How does the York student keep abreast of the events that surround him or her? Daily newspapers proved a little more popular. Although foreign dailies are available at the Scott library, students reported reading little more than one and a half foreign dailies per month. Statistics distort the real numbers in this case as the vast majority of student did not admit to reading foreign dai-

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lies at all save for a small number who generally perused publications from their native lands.

Canadian dailies fared better as students estimated reading 14.2 daily newspapers per month. Here again it is worth noting that "reading a newspaper" is a subjective activity, since few people read a paper cover to cover, and many people consider the *Sun* to be a newspaper.

Publications released on a monthly basis usually treat their subjects in

greater depth, but very few students have taken notice of the wide range of publications available. On average, students reported reading less than a third of a foreign monthly and less than half of a Canadian monthly. Trade magazines, published also on a monthly basis, fared a little better as students reported reading half a foreign publication of this sort and a little more than one Canadian monthly trade magazine.

Taken as a whole, the results of the poll seem to indicate that students have some willingness to read, but generally do not invest their leisure time in this activity. Indeed, considering the short period of time allotted to reading every day, it is difficult to conceive that students read as much as they reported. Can students who have such limited exposure to literature be expected to absorb scholarly works?

The most evident conclusion to be drawn from this unpretentious polling exercise is that students at York are willing, but inexperienced readers who should not be treated as lovers of the printed word. This is not to argue that course directors stop assigning readings, far from it, but rather to plea for a revision of reading lists so that students can be encouraged to read thought-provoking, quality material. Too often are good, but convoluted books assigned without proper guidance. I urge course directors not to choose books that are merely comprehensive.

Students demand that the works assigned offer challenging problems

of interpretation, express clear theses and cogently establish documentation. Articles should also be extensively used following the same criteria as books because they can be readily analyzed in a 50-minute class.

In brief, York's teachers must make an effort to *sell* reading to their students by assigning readable material, and by spending more time in analyzing the structure of the works chosen. Many students, I think, would appreciate hearing informal reading recommendations from their teachers on subjects not directly relating to the course material.

If a small poll is any indication of the popularity of reading on this campus, the University as a whole has a major task on its hands. I propose that more teachers poll their students informally on their reading habits and that a "Reading Comprehensive Workshop" be established alongside the successful "Writing Workshop" so as to aid those students who feel unable to completely exploit their readings.

If the axiom that "the best way to learn to write is to read" had any validity, then perhaps the quality of writing on campus will improve as students learn to read better. It is unfortunate that a university should take on the responsibility of teaching how to read when its essential function is to teach how to think critically, but something must be done to fill this need until the primary and secondary school systems in this country do their jobs.

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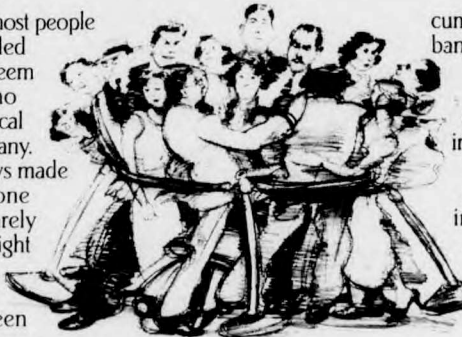
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