

Reading's new chapter?

[Sarah T. Williams](#), Star Tribune

Is reading at risk? Or is there a "new literacy" emerging that cannot be measured by traditional testing tools and standards?

That debate is sure to flare anew today among literacy experts, teachers, multimedia whiz kids and good old-fashioned book lovers as the National Endowment for the Arts lays out a study that sounds the alarm about the dire state of reading in our culture. It's the second time in three years it has raised such concerns.

To the first question, NEA researchers and chairman Dana Gioia are ready with statistics from more than 40 broad-based studies on the reading habits of children, teenagers and adults.

"Americans are reading less, therefore they read! less well," Gioia said last week during a conference call with reporters and writers. "And because they read less well, they do less well in school, less well in the economy and are less involved in civic life -- in every way that we're able to measure this."

The NEA's new study ("To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence," at www.nea.gov) echoes the findings of a 2004 study ("Reading at Risk") but brings in more recent data from many more sources, including federal agencies, universities, nonprofit foundations and business research organizations. Among the findings:

- Nearly half of all Americans ages 18 to 24 read no books for pleasure.
- People ages 15 to 24 spend only seven to 10 minutes per day on voluntary reading (about 60 percent less than the average American).
- Reading scores for 17-year-olds are down, while those for 9-year-olds are at an all-time high (ground that is lost in ! adolescence).
- Even while reading, 58 percent of mid! dle- and high-school students are watching TV, listening to music or using other media.
- Literary readers among college graduates dropped from 82 percent in 1982 to 67 percent in 2002.

"These negative trends have more than literary importance," the NEA study argues. They correlate, among other things, to fewer job opportunities, lost wages, higher

incarceration rates and less participation in civic and community life, including voting and volunteering.

Begging to disagree

"For heaven's sake," said Prof. Rosemarie Park, a literacy expert at the University of Minnesota's College of Education and Human Development. "There's a correlation between the size of people's big toes and their IQs. That doesn't mean to say they're causal. In northern Europe, the storks all fly north in spring and the birth rate goes up. Does that mean storks bring babies? That's where correlational data get you."

There's a reason why people in prison have real ding problems, she said. "The underlying variable is that they're poor. Poor people have less access to education, tend to knock over the local convenience store ... and can't afford good lawyers."

But, counters Gioia: "The poorest people of the United States who read behave fundamentally differently from the richest people in the United States who don't read. This does seem to be a transformational behavior that changes your life's course."

Their opposing views highlight fundamental, philosophical differences of opinion about reading and learning in the digital age.

From Park's perspective, the new information and communication technologies -- blogs, word processors, Web pages, search engines, CD-ROM, e-mail, text-messaging, listservs, interactive gaming, virtual worlds and avatars -- all contribute to more active, exciting and engaged learning.

"I see every day, when I'm teaching my students, how much better job I can do now with all of these modalities available to me," she said. "I can show them! things I could never show them before. I can give them access to readings from all over the globe. I can get them into databases. I can take them on [virtual] field trips. All of those things make life incredibly richer. Whereas before, the only access we had was sitting down around the fire with the Victorian father reading a book and sort of raising the educational level of the family to a higher plane of sensibility. Now we have all of these different sources, so why is it so bad that we use them?"

From Gioia's perspective, the new technologies -- for all of their power and richness -- contribute to a highly distractible, entertainment-oriented culture (fueled by a disintegrating print media) and "provide no measurable substitute for the intellectual and personal development initiated and sustained by frequent reading." That multitasking thing kids do is "scary," he said. "I have to say that from my own family experience, I'm highly suspicious of the quality of attention given to the homework while watching television."

A 'moving target'

One book of scholarly research that explores the difficulty of measuring the impact of new technologies on reading and learning is "Theoretical Models and Processes of Reading," edited by Robert Ruddell and Norman Unrau (International Reading Association, 2004), a graduate-level text now in its fifth edition.

"We have argued that the definition of literacy has always changed over historical periods but that it is changing today at a pace we have never before experienced," say Donald Leu, Charles Kinzer, Julie Coiro and Dana Cammack in a chapter that explores a new theory of literacy. "Literacy, therefore, may be thought of as a moving target, continually changing its meaning depending on what society expects literate individuals to do."

Simple, linear text, they argue, no longer suffices as the sole factor in that equation. Today's schoolchildren must not only be able to decode linear text, they must also comprehend the strategic use of color; various clues that indicate hyperlinked texts and graphics; the possible actions of meaning-bearing icons and animations; and pictures, maps, charts, and graphs that are not static, but that can change to address questions that an interactive reader can pose to informational text during the reading act."

Worth the argument

There's one thing on which Gioia and Park do heartily agree: All of this is worthy of attention.

Said Gioia: "Our objective here is to create a national discussion about these issues. We hope that coming out of that discussion will be more and better research about the causes of these [downward reading] trends."

Said Park: "We need him [Gioia] to come out and scream bloody murder. And then we need people to say, hang on a second. This is part of a discourse and a dialogue. There isn't truth."

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