

Troubling Case of Readers' Block

Citing Decline Among Older Kids, NEA Report Warns of Dire Effects

By Bob Thompson

"The books that help you most are those which make you think that most. The hardest way of learning is that of easy reading; but a great book that comes from a great thinker is a ship of thought, deep freighted with truth and beauty."

Pablo Neruda

(Chilean poet, diplomat and politician, Won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1971, 1904-1973)

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<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/11/18/AR2007111801415.html>

Americans are reading less and their reading proficiency is declining at troubling rates, according to [a report that the National Endowment for the Arts will issue today](#). The trend is particularly strong among older teens and young adults, and if it is not reversed, the NEA report suggests, it will have a profound negative effect on the nation's economic and civic future.

"This is really alarming data," said NEA Chairman Dana Gioia. "Luckily, we still have an opportunity to address it, but if we wait 10, 20 years, I think it may be too late."

Titled "To Read or Not to Read," the report is a significant expansion of the NEA's widely cited 2004 study, "Reading at Risk." The NEA based that earlier study exclusively on data from its own arts surveys, and as a result, that analysis focused mainly on so-called literary reading -- novels, stories, plays and poems. This led some critics to downplay its implications.

The new report assembles much more data, drawing on large-scale studies done by other government agencies (such as the [Department of Education](#)) and by non-government organizations. These studies tend to use broader definitions of reading, said Sunil Iyengar, the NEA's director of research and analysis, with many looking at "all kinds of reading," a category that includes reading done online.

The story the numbers tell, Gioia said, can be summed up in about four sentences:

"We are doing a better job of teaching kids to read in elementary school. But once they enter adolescence, they fall victim to a general culture which does not encourage or reinforce reading. Because these people then read less, they read less well. Because they read less well, they do more poorly in school, in the job market and in civic life."

Particularly striking, Gioia and Iyengar both said, are the declines that occur between age 9 and age 17 in reading proficiency scores and time spent reading.

The percentage of 9-year-olds who say they "read almost every day for fun," the NEA report notes, rose slightly, from 53 percent to 54 percent, between 1984 and 2004. During

roughly the same time period, average reading scores for 9-year-olds rose sharply. But the percentage of 17-year-olds reading almost every day for fun dropped from 31 percent in 1984 to 22 percent in 2004, with average reading scores showing steady declines.

Iyengar emphasized that the NEA's data can show correlations but cannot prove a causal relationship between reading decline and, say, the proliferation of electronic media. Asked what he personally made of the late-teenage numbers, however, he offered a scenario likely to sound familiar to parents and educators.

"When you hit adolescence," Iyengar said, "there's generally less parental control." Peer pressure gets much stronger, and the culture offers "numerous distractions away from reading."

The NEA reports that in 2006, 15-to-24-year-olds spent just 7 to 10 minutes a day voluntarily reading anything at all. It also notes that between 1992 and 2003, the percentage of college graduates who tested as "proficient in reading prose" declined from 40 percent to 31 percent.

In addition to presenting data on how much and how well Americans read, Iyengar said, the NEA set out to address the "so what?" question often asked in the wake of its earlier report.

Here is some of what it found:

Thirty-eight percent of employers rate high school graduates as "deficient" in reading comprehension, while 72 percent rate them deficient in writing. Good reading skills correlate strongly with higher earnings and more job opportunities. Reading skills also correlate with increased voting, volunteerism, charity work, attendance at cultural events and even exercising and playing sports.

"This is not a study about literary reading," Gioia said. It's a study about reading of *any* sort and "what the consequences of doing it well or doing it badly are." In an increasingly competitive world, the consequences of doing it badly include "economic decline."

Among the NEA study's limitations is its lack of specific data about online reading, a subject on which, Gioia said, research is not yet strong.

[University of Maryland](#) English professor Matthew Kirschenbaum, whose academic interests include electronic literature, organized a forum to discuss the 2004 NEA report. That report's weakness, Kirschenbaum said in an interview last week, was that it didn't account for "the different ways in which we read."

Kirschenbaum had not seen the new report. After hearing a brief summary, however, he didn't sound inclined to change his mind. "The fact that we don't read the same way that we read 50 or 200 years ago," he said, is not necessarily "symptomatic of a general cultural decline."

Gioia disagreed.

"The Internet is the most powerful informational tool ever developed by humanity, except perhaps the phonetic alphabet," he said. "But it does not seem to nourish the sustained,

linear attention" that traditional print media do.

Last Friday, Gioia and Iyengar previewed "To Read or Not to Read" for a group of perhaps 50 publishers, editors and other interested parties gathered at the Mercantile Library in [New York](#).

"It was a sobering presentation," said Knopf publicity director Paul Bogaards, who attended with Knopf Editor in Chief Sonny Mehta. Publishers have long been aware of negative reading trends, Bogaards said, but "haven't had the data."

"The response was one of concern," said Fordham University marketing professor Albert Greco, a publishing industry expert who was also at the NEA presentation. "Maybe we should be thrilled that half of the people are still reading," Greco added, "but this is a graying market."

[HarperCollins](#) CEO Jane Friedman described herself as "skeptical but not dismissive" of the NEA's analysis.

Her company is "very much into the digital side of the business," Friedman said, and when it comes to a customer's choice of format, "I don't care. Reading is reading." She pointed to the data on young children's reading as a positive, noting that "we're seeing great growth in our children's business."

The NEA report comes without recommendations. This choice was deliberate, Gioia said, because "no one institution" can solve the reading problem alone.

"What we're trying to do is say: These are the facts. This is a framework to understand the issues. Let's talk about it," Gioia said. And the key question is: What are the consequences if America becomes "a nation in which reading is a minority activity?"