

**Waikato Institute of Technology, New Zealand**

**Gail Pittaway**

**Bedtime reading or professional protocol?: (Is reading the canon still an expectation of the New Zealand Tertiary Sector?)**

Abstract:

It is a well-supported fact that reading enhances language use and practice. But what authors have our tertiary students read by the time they reach tertiary institutions and do we test this? What reading are they currently doing? What reading do we want them to do? What would their preferred canon be? This paper reflects on theory about reading and literacy, but notes a gap in the literature after high school. It includes a report on the results of a longitudinal survey of tertiary students from a particular creative writing programme in New Zealand, polling students' recognition of authors by surname. From a range of interviews with current and past students and lecturers of creative writing programmes in New Zealand, the paper also considers key factors that determine whether students know the names of authors or why they read preferred books. The paper also asks whether there is any point in trying to retain a hierarchical, structuralist approach to the canon, when a more populist, genre-based approach might earn our tertiary institutions more student entries, as our accountants and, increasingly, our managers, seem to require.

Biographical note:

Gail Pittaway is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Media Arts, at Wintec, the Waikato Institute of Technology, in Hamilton, New Zealand. Her research interests include creative writing (poetry, short story and scripts), the teaching of creative writing, and ritual developments in the history of theatre. She has edited two books; "Writers in the Gardens" and "Love Street" and has had stories broadcast on National Radio, New Zealand. Gail is also the *Waikato Times* theatre critic and contributes regular live book reviews for the Nine to Noon programme on National Radio in New Zealand. She is a member of the New Zealand Communication Association, The Tertiary Writing Network, the New Zealand Society of Authors and has been an executive member of the Australian Association of Writing Programmes since 2004.

Keywords:

Literature—metacognition—reading and creative writing

Traditionally, writing and reading have been taught as distinct, discrete disciplines. Writing was taught according to Aristotelian precepts, with a rhetorical basis, while reading had a more controversial theory base, reflecting different versions of the means by which we acquire literacy and vocabulary, essentially as sounds or as ideas. It was not until the twentieth century that concepts of the interrelatedness of the two came to prominence, perhaps because it was the first century to value education for all classes and, by its end, for both genders and all races. Linguistics, human or social philosophy, and education theory deriving first from Piaget, still form the core of literacy theory, however, the later constructivist ideas of Vygotsky (1978) and psychological work of Chomsky generated a new enthusiasm for the transactional, (Rosenblatt) integrated (Spivey) processes (Graves) about writing in the 1970s, initially in the USA.

The International Reading Association (IRA) and subsequent lobby and interest groups in various countries have been active in supporting literacy acquisition and investigating support for those with learning and reading difficulties since 1956. There are active reading and writing internet groups, a National Reading Project in the USA, and networks of writing organisations, world-wide, to endorse the value of writing as creative process, in all areas, and to acknowledge the importance of reading to this process. In New Zealand the Tertiary Education Commission has published helpful guidelines about adult literacy (2008).

Like writing, it is now generally agreed that reading is a process of metacognition, a creative act and cognitive act in itself. "Every reading act is an event, a transaction," (Rosenblatt 1988: 6). In the theoretical and pedagogical literature on literacy and enhancing writing skills, most studies of literacy and reading are based on primary and secondary education where acquisitions of literacy and vocabulary are still developing. For example, Morrow (1992) is still quoted as author of a key case study in which socially disadvantaged school students participated in a survey concerning language acquisition through a literature-based program.

There are few set in the tertiary sector where an expectation of a higher level of cognition is expected of the students. At the University of Pittsburgh, instead of teaching reading and writing sub-skills in separate courses, Bartholomae and Petrosky (1986) advocated an integrated reading-writing approach that encouraged students to establish their own authority to write and make decisions. In Manila, Carlo Magna (2008) used the language testing codes of English as a Second Language to measure improvements in written proficiency through the use of reading, memory and metacognition strategies.

Not only is it valuable to teach writing and reading in partnership, it might well be vital for the survival of the printed text as source and resource. No matter how well established a link between reading and writing, there is an increasing problem in tertiary education that most of us are aware of and struggle to manage. Our students, though passing every reading test and operating at the highest reading levels, (16 years equivalent), have an aversion to, even intolerance of the kind of reading they need to complete in order to operate as scholars and researchers. This includes fiction, particularly the more challenging and complicated kind, not leisure or genre reading;

also theory and analysis—whether in books journals or online texts. This makes difficulties for those who teach literature as well as those who teach writing. Not only do our students resist reading deeply, they also lack essential knowledge of literary traditions, the very traditions they participate in as academics. In response to this aversion to reading, universities and tertiary institutions have developed strategies to entice students into studying ancient texts while not appearing to do so. We offer shorter reading lists, goblets of text in first year classes, links to blogs and online newspapers that interact with texts. We group texts into thematic bands, add popular titles, study films of books, sometimes without the books.

The standard model BA in English, with a survey course in year one leading to basic chronological developments or movements over the ensuing years has become mediated through thematic groupings or under glamorous course titles, so that Nineteenth Century Literature is read as *God and the poets*, or *Gothic*, and many new topics such as *Literature from Sonnets to Comics* now reflect the post colonial, post feminist and post modern preoccupations of an enhanced literary aesthetic. We are enjoined to seek more students in our programs—yet, we need to compete with courses teaching cyberspace gaming or that feature student TV stations where students get credit for filming pop music videos and running their own shows with compilations of downloaded music.

Of course, the debate is not at all simply over marketing or student numbers. With any institution, the tenets and canon need constant revision and challenge, indeed their very existence requires challenge. It is hard to know where to begin if we were to rewrite the literary canon to suit a new century. However, we must also protect the intellectual integrity of our degrees and the content we teach, as much as the higher critical skills involved in learning.

In the last two decades, the tertiary experience for academics has changed enormously. According to a New Zealand survey of academics our perception of the size of our increased workload is around 4 per cent per year (Houston, Meyer & Paewai 2006). Once student learning fees were no longer heavily subsidized by the state, and the economies of user pays and market forces introduced, the rush of paying student enrolments gradually changed the delivery and content of many programs. More students meant more income but also more marking, more rooms and resourcing, more interactions and of course, an increase in those most valuable of all – international and postgraduate students. In the meantime, we are expected to account for student productivity, in completions and passes, as well as account for our own scholarly privileges with research.

In the meantime there is a gap between our expectations of students and their actual knowledge of literature, in terms of familiarity, awareness, let alone reading. Leaving accusations against primary and secondary education aside, we nonetheless acknowledge them as part of the problem. Most literacy studies are done before a student reaches university yet, once there, they are expected to read some of the most theoretical, instructional, technical and complicated language that they will encounter in their lives and to write in an academic style which seems artificial to them.

In creative writing, for example, how can a student know she is being original if she is not aware of the canon or at least a cohort of writing in that field? How can a work be a pastiche or ironic, if there is no awareness of the range of exemplars from which those contrasts draw?

And what of the internet, that great democratizing force, the source and repository of so much knowledge? Surely it is a great asset to the writing teacher as it offers so many profiles, formats and opportunities for writing? Information is now immediate, accessible, generally reliable. Versions of most classic texts are available online. Yet, in a recent observation survey I conducted of 200 students at a computing hub in a New Zealand tertiary institution, at 9.30 am in July 2010, 80 per cent were on Facebook. According to their own statistics, Facebook users comprise the world's third largest 'population', 500 million people.

A survey of my own students' reading habits began as a checklist of their recognition of authors' names; it has developed into a five year long process of record keeping and comparison. There is evidence of several trends. The first is that students are reading a great deal; the second is that the majority of students are choosing "light" texts for reading such as online magazines, celebrity endorsed best sellers, strongly genre fiction or specialist websites about food, sport or cars. Finally, the changes in the popularity of authors from year-to-year is directly related to other media – in particular cinema and television adaptations, from Tolkien, through Austen to Steig Larsson.

Originally a classroom exercise in a writing class (Writing Genres 103), the students were given a list of names of authors and asked to put a mark against the name of an author they recognized, and make another mark if they had read anything by the author. Author recognition is seen as a higher level of literacy (TEC 2008). It was a small survey, covering off the students in first year writing classes at one institution in one programme, with no more than 60 respondents. The cohort of students are polytechnic not university students, however, all are enrolled in a degree program, a Bachelor of Media Arts and have achieved the entry criteria for tertiary level study. Most are school leavers, coming from structured classrooms where English is a compulsory subject to the final year.

The list of authors' names came from an independent index for the *Today in Literature* website, some 10 pages, which were distributed to the class as hard copy and then the results of author recognition counted up, effectively a content analysis. The choice of author is interesting—as it includes script and screenwriters, such as Alfred Hitchcock, not only writers of prose and poetry. Five years ago the survey was formalized as a regular component of the course delivery, and widened to include second and third year classes. From this research arose a presentation at the AAWP in Brisbane asking, "Is the mighty canon a bang or a whimper?" (Pittaway 2006) It was reported that Shakespeare's name is the only one recognized by 100 per cent of respondents, although not all claim to have read his works. Generally there are only another 20 or so names widely recognized, and large gaps on the lists where no names are recognized at all (See table below).

Of even more concern, students' recollection of past reading was poor. They were all enrolled in a core writing class which has a reading booklet with excerpts from John Donne to Fay Weldon, for critical analysis and discussion (engagement with text is seen as a critical part of the development of metacognitive skills of critiquing writing as writers (Spivey 1990, Pearson and Tierney 1984)). However, many did not remember the names of authors they had encountered in the previous few weeks. This has continued to be noticeable. On the other hand, in 2010 responses, more than 30 per cent did identify authors from their reading booklets both on the author lists and in their personal responses, as being preferred authors.

This then gave rise to the larger question of what, if anything, were the students reading? Two additional pages of open questions were added, including demographic background information and questions about reading habits with non-book material, such as online magazines, leisure reading. This was an optional, voluntary component and from it two presentations of the results about reading habits of students have been given; at the Tertiary Writing Network in 2007 and the NZ Communication Association in 2009 (Pittaway 2007, 2009).

Problematically, in early versions of the questionnaire, students did not identify leisure reading as reading, they did not identify online class work as reading, nor did they identify social networking as reading. When it was pointed out that these were all included as reading and accepted into the range of options, several students looked happier to have something to include.

In 2007, the questionnaire added a request for students to identify websites, blogs and social networking sites they frequented- and a new discussion for clarification arose in that they were all accessing I-tunes and You-tube, MySpace and Bebo, but not all of these contain reading materials. Other tertiary tutors of writing at universities and polytechnics, uniformly agreed in the conference open discussions that their students are reluctant to read texts, that they suspect their own students would perform similarly, that their students are also "semi-literate" or unsophisticated readers.

The next iteration of the survey in 2008 included questions which invited students to measure the amount of reading they have done over increasing periods of time; in the last week, last month, last six months and to identify their preferred reading in that time. This is initially measured in categories of time from 0-2 hours per week to 6-8 hours per week. In 2010, 50 per cent of the group identified themselves as reading 3-4 hours per week, and 50 per cent above that, with 25 per cent of those indicating they are reading more than 8 hours per week.

Finally, in 2009 a question was appended as to which authors or texts they would be interested in reading in the future and Facebook added to the range of reading material. Around 30 per cent of respondents named Facebook as reading material, despite much higher use being observed in computer classrooms.

In 2008, although this is always offered as an anonymous survey, several students (60 per cent) identified themselves by name in Part A of the survey. They were usually students who enjoyed reading and were willing to have their knowledge recognized and there was a correspondingly higher level of author recognition when their coded Part B surveys were compared to the Part A sections. Furthermore, with the

voluntarily named students, here at last was hard evidence to equate author recognition, higher reading hours, wider reading patterns with higher achievements in writing assessments. The same has happened in subsequent surveys in 2009 and 2010, where for example, student Y has identified herself in the survey; Part A has been coded as Y and matched against part B responses of student Y (the parts are separated at collection but stored sequentially). In each case these students achieve A or high B passes in the writing tasks (75 per cent +).

Interestingly, in the 2010 survey, for the first time Shakespeare was noted as least preferred school text by two respondents, but Shakespeare remains the highest polling author to be identified.

*Ranking of author recognition: 2010*

Shakespeare 100%  
 Dickens 92%  
 Tolkien 90%  
 Austen 88%  
 King 85%  
 Geisel, Dr Seuss 80%  
 Mansfield 75%  
 Frank, Anne 70%  
 Hitchcock 60%  
 Wilde 55%  
 Milne, AA 52%  
 Poe 52%

While familiarity with canonical texts is not necessarily an indication of ability or skill in anything but recognition, when both parts of the survey are matched, especially against named students, there is considerable evidence of the value of this familiarity to the quality and even quantity of written work produced by students who read at least 6-8 hours per week and have a functional awareness of writers not of their own time and place.

There are areas of concern about literacy in our society. In a survey conducted by Statistics New Zealand about how people spend their leisure time (Time Use Survey 2000) the figures showed that while many of the 8,500 people surveyed identified themselves as reading on average 45 minutes a day, “they also identified that reading is a pursuit that often occurs in conjunction with other activities. People may read newspapers or magazines or books when they are travelling, eating or drinking, working, caregiving, watching television or listening to music.” (Statistics New Zealand: 3) The amount of time spent reading reportedly increased with age, so that 12 to 24 year olds identified themselves as reading just 11 minutes as a primary activity, (and 10 further minutes per day as a simultaneous activity) while those in the 65 plus age group were identified as reading for 58 minutes as a primary activity and a further 38 minutes as a simultaneous activity.

In a report to the Tertiary Education Commission, on Numeracy and Literacy, (Satherly 2010) the author reflects on the results of an Adult Literacy and Lifeskills (ALL) survey conducted in 2006 in which approximately 14 per cent of the

population of New Zealand has very low literacy (Level 1 of the ALL measures—where Level 3 is the benchmark). Satherley outlines some of the benefits of high levels of literacy in the population as contributing “to the personal well-being and social development of individuals ... and communities. They are associated with higher earnings, and increased chances of being in stable employment ... They are also associated with better health, better parenting and greater levels of engagement and participation in family and social life” (Satherley: 5).

It is the contention of this author that more tertiary lecturers, across all disciplines, could be made aware of some techniques of remedial advanced reading, in order to encourage students to engage more effectively with complex texts. All reading improves writing, but making the students aware of the text and respond to it overtly, no matter what the text, is important in the metacognition process. Such techniques include use of a journal with “talk-back” notes, jotting down important points, confusing spots, places of disagreement as if talking to the author; genre switching, responding creatively to a traditional text format, e.g. the autobiography of a building, a poem about an organization, a newsletter about what students learned in a 3-week period or tracking a key theme or concept in a flow chart or under column headings. (The National Reading Project) Any activity which assists student awareness of the different kinds of reading needed for different texts, or of their own reading strengths and weaknesses is valuable in the process of learning and in processing learning.

Finally, my experience with the reading survey supports my belief that in our writing classes at least we should attempt to offer opportunities for students to engage widely as well as deeply with reading literature from other places and other times, including works from the much debated canon. After all, compared with the offerings of popular genre fiction, with its simple satisfactions, there are life-long benefits: entertainment, increased vocabulary, historical knowledge, extended comprehension, interaction with invention, recognition of craft, enhanced aesthetic consciousness, cerebral diversion, increased versatility of style and range of reading and writing appreciation of past mastery, discovery of ideas, a sense of intellectual progression.

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