

College Readiness in the Age of Talking Dogs and Zombie Beauty Queens

Recent reports indicate declining reading comprehension skills among incoming college students. Obviously, the ability to comprehend at a college level is an essential skill for an incoming college student. To truly comprehend, a reader must be able, not just to read words, but to weigh, interpret, make judgments and extrapolate the underlying meaning -- even *feelings* -- of a passage. Comprehension relates directly to a student's underlying prior knowledge and life experience -- intellectual commodities generally accumulated over time, via engagement with the world, relationships, jobs, good and bad experiences, hobbies and interests.

My kids are now in their teens. They're all good readers and have pretty good comprehension skills. Throughout their elementary school years, they were encouraged, cajoled and challenged by teachers and administrators to read. There were reading contests, reading races, school-wide read-in's, Read in Your Jammies Day, Read with a Partner Day, Read with a Silly Hat On Day... The end result was, yes, students at their school could all read. But, as a parent volunteer in the reading program, I began to question the amount of fiction the students were reading. I observed that the vast majority -- perhaps 98%, of the reading the students engaged in was fiction. Much of it was not even very good fiction, tending toward vapid and narcissistic. Could the antics of a talking dog truly help students build a firm base of prior knowledge? Would the experiences of a zombie teen beauty queen contribute in a real and meaningful way to a student's ability to interpret and understand life? Are our students on a diet of literary candy?

Ludic (loo'-dik) reading is a term coined by Victor Nell, in his 1988 work *Lost in a Book: The Psychology of Reading for Pleasure*. It refers to that trance-like state that readers enter when reading for pleasure. As a parent, I love to see my child so engrossed in a book that she hasn't texted her BFF in over an hour. But, do you know what I love even more? I love to see her struggling and frustrated, picking her way through a difficult or boring piece of nonfiction - maybe an article on middle east politics, or mining and metallurgy in medieval Europe. Why? Because, like eating her vegetables, it's good for her. *Really* good for her! She's getting far more of her daily essential reading vitamins when she struggles to comprehend difficult or boring content. It builds analytical and concentration skills, and adds to her arsenal of prior knowledge -- essentials for college and career readiness. Unless a college student is majoring in literature, how often will they be asked to read nonfiction? How about career readiness? How many jobs require employees to sit around reading nonfiction? (If you hear of one, let me know.)

Nonfiction comes in many forms: essays, journals, newspapers and periodicals, histories, science books, encyclopedias, letters, autobiographies, biographies, travel books, etc. The point is, there's a load of good, interesting nonfiction out there and it's

time we gave it equal time! Our current educational system emphasizes ludic over informational reading. By adjusting the balance to include more nonfiction reading for information, we could do a better job of preparing students for the level of reading comprehension that will be required in college and career.

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Susan Mulcaire is the author of the college readiness series: *The Middle School Student's Guide to Ruling the World! (Work Habits and Organizational Skills)*, *The Middle School Student's Guide to College - Confidence on the Path to College in 6-8* and *The Middle School Student's Guide to Study Skills!* (due 2012.)

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