Reinvigorating Student Interest in Pleasure Reading
How to Build an Effective Sustained Silent Reading Program in the Classroom

David O'Brien

Abstract: Pleasure reading has undergone a drastic decline among students while time spent on electronic devices has soared. In order to promote literacy in an age of digital entertainment, educators must reinvigorate student interest in reading for fun. Sustained silent reading (SSR) is a promising tool to achieve that goal. SSR theorizes that students will experience reading as a pleasurable activity if provided the freedom to choose their own books and the ability to interact with those texts without summative assessments. Although there are many ways to structure SSR in the classroom, research shows that the most effective programs help students select books matching their ability level and interests, create opportunities for sharing with peers, integrate SSR with lesson planning, and promote teacher modeling of independent reading.

Introduction

Russian-born poet and essayist Joseph Brodsky (1991) once said, "There are worse crimes than burning books. One of them is not reading them." However, ask a student in almost any secondary classroom in the United States whether they ever pick up a book and read in their free time, and you are likely to find that we are living in a period of mass lawlessness. Students simply are not choosing to read as a leisure activity. In fact, nationwide statistics confirm a disturbing trend: pleasure reading is undergoing a drastic decline among children of all ages, and especially teenagers. According to a recent study by Twenge and Spitzberg (2018), only 16% of high school seniors read on a daily basis, a drop of 44% since the late 1970s. Indeed, nearly one out of three teenagers now report that they do not read a single book for pleasure over the course of a full year. At the same time, use of digital media is on the rise, with the average high school senior spending six hours a day plugged into electronic devices during free time. Liquid crystal display screens have replaced the written page as the dominant recreational activity of our age. This poses an existential problem for educators charged with helping students to meet literacy standards. In order to foster engagement with books, we must find a way to turn reading back into a practice that carries the same cultural currency and appeal for our students as the ubiquitous electronic forms of entertainment available to them before they ever set foot in a classroom.

The Theory of Sustained Silent Reading

Despite the relative recency of the digital dilemma, the solution to the decline in pleasure reading may be one that was developed decades before streaming services,

personal gaming systems, and the World Wide Web were even conceived. In the 1960's, Lyman Hunt, an educator from the State of Vermont, examined what he perceived to be a decline in student interest in reading. Hunt identified two overarching problems. First, he focused on the practice of forced book selection. Adults who read for pleasure do not choose books that they do not like, and if they happen to start a text that does not interest them, they quickly abandon it. Yet teachers frequently do not follow that blueprint in education. At every grade level, educators implement a curriculum that tells students exactly what they have to read, and we require our students to stay with those books no matter how disengaged they might be. Hunt theorized that this pedagogical technique turns reading into an unpleasant experience and believed that educators can help students develop internal motivation to read by allowing them to choose "high-interest book[s]" that they actually enjoy (Hunt, 1997, p. 279).

Hunt's second primary concern with traditional reading instruction was its emphasis on accountability. Teachers typically assess a student's mastery of any given skill, including those attendant to reading, by assigning tasks that require the student to demonstrate his or her ability to perform it. Yet this obsession with evaluation and appraisal does not exist outside the educational environment among people who read for pleasure. There are very few people beyond academia who, upon finishing a book, decide to write a five-paragraph expository essay analyzing its use of imagery, theme, or allegory. In fact, if adult readers were required to perform such tasks, they likely would not engage with a book in the first place because "the very knowledge that they have to do something with reading other than what they choose to do takes away from its magic. It keeps them from experiencing the enjoyment of just relaxing with a good book" (Pilgreen, 2000, p. 15). Accordingly, in order to instill a love of reading in their students, Hunt believed that teachers should foster reading experiences with no strings attached.

Out of these ideas, the practice of sustained silent reading (more commonly referred to as "SSR") was born. The idea underlying SSR is remarkably simple. In order to teach students to appreciate reading, educators must provide them, on a regular basis, with a defined period of time during the school day to read books of their own choosing without holding them accountable for the content. If this procedure sounds strangely obvious, it is because there is nothing novel or unique about it. As Stephen Krashen, an educator specializing in literacy research, has pointed out: "Free voluntary reading, or reading because you want to, is the kind of recreational reading that most mature readers do most every day" (Krashen, 2006, p. 43). SRR is simply a vehicle for transporting that activity from the living room to the classroom. It allows students to become better readers by practicing their reading skills, and it encourages them to commit to that practice by creating a set of conditions that will help them experience reading as a pleasurable endeavor.

The Key Elements of an Effective SSR Program

Unfortunately, while the theory behind SSR has intuitive appeal, its implementation in the classroom has seen mixed results. On the one hand, there are "literally hundreds of studies" that have found a positive relationship between SSR programs and advances in reading achievement (Garan & DeVoogd, 2008, p. 338). Similarly,

teachers with practical experience implementing SSR in their classrooms report exponential increases in reading interest among their students (Gardiner, 2001). Yet at the same time, others have cast doubt on the effectiveness of SSR. Some studies have found that the students who enjoy and succeed in SSR programs are those that are already motivated to read in the first place (Siah & Kwok, 2010). And not all teachers have had positive SSR experiences in their classrooms. Concerns range from student inability to pick books that match their ability level and interests, to increases in off-task behavior when accountability devices are removed, to difficulty evaluating the cognitive level at which students are interacting with their independent texts (Kelly & Clausen-Grace, 2006).

Part of the reason for these mixed results is that there is no single agreed-upon approach to the design and implementation of SSR. Many different variables can be manipulated when introducing students to an independent reading program, and thus researchers face a daunting task in attempting to analyze the effectiveness of SSR because there is no constant construct to measure. Yet all is not lost. Across the broad platform of SSR research, it is possible to isolate and identify several core curricular components that appear to be shared by those programs with a track record of success. They are: (1) providing students with structured support in book selection; (2) creating opportunities for students to share what they are reading with their peers; (3) integrating independent reading with lesson planning; and (4) modeling the practice of independent reading during the SSR period. Although none of these techniques is guaranteed to transform students into lifelong readers, any teacher seeking to use SSR in the classroom for the first time would be well-served to design his or her program with these strategies in mind.

Structured Support in Book Selection

SSR posits that students will develop intrinsic motivation to engage with a book when they find pleasure and personal meaning in the reading experience. Yet many young readers do not know how to select books to which they can connect either in terms of ability level or interest. French and Rumschlag (2004), for example, have found that the least able readers select the most difficult texts, significantly undermining their ability to understand what they read. Students also frequently lack the foundational skills needed to choose a book that excites them. All too often, a class trip to the school library results in students wandering aimlessly up and down the shelves, reading only the titles on the spines in front of them before ultimately making a selection based on the image from the book's cover. It is no wonder, then, that when students are asked to read these books in SSR, they engage in off-task behaviors. Independent reading with a mismatched book is no more stimulating for a burgeoning reader than having a canonical text thrust upon them.

The solution to this problem is a simple and obvious one: teachers need to show students how to select texts that correspond to their ability level and interests. On the ability side, the strategy can be as simple as teaching students the five finger rule: read a single page from a proposed book, hold up a finger for every word that is unrecognizable, and aim for a text that yields two to three raised fingers per page. With respect to book interest, teachers can engage students in conversations about features of books they have enjoyed in the past, show them how to locate reviews

of a proposed text, or ask them to read the back cover and a few sample pages. The key is not the specific strategy taught, but rather the provision of structured support in the selection process to find an appropriate match. Indeed, research shows that when teachers help students choose texts that they can navigate and are enjoyable to them, two things happen. First, student enthusiasm for independent reading increases (Parr & Maguiness, 2005). And equally important, off-task behaviors decrease (Williams et al., 2017). Thus, in order to hook students on independent reading, educators must first teach them to how to fish with the proper bait.

Creating Opportunities for Book Sharing

Another key feature of SSR success is providing students with regular opportunities to share their books with others. At one level, encouraging students to talk about their books may seem inimical to the concept of "silent" reading. However, just like adult readers are eager to discuss a book that appeals to them, social interaction is motivating for students. SSR time does not and cannot mean that students read their books in a completely solitary and noninteractive environment. Silence enables students to focus on their independent reading, but the most effective SSR programs also tap into student engagement by providing them with the opportunities for communion that they thrive upon.

There are many methods to build book sharing opportunities into an SSR program. Some teachers encourage their students to engage in short, regular think-pair-share sessions after reading to discuss aspects of their books that stood out to them (Dickerson, 2015). Others create opportunities for their students to give a book talk to the class, organize small group discussions to connect what they are reading to their own experiences, or set aside time for students to write a review for their peers (Lee, 2011). The one constant of SSR success is treating independent reading as a social activity by encouraging students to talk with each other about their books. Just like structured support in book selection, not only does this "immediately and dramatically" reduce off-task behavior (Bryan et al., 2003, p. 67), but it has the potential to generate so much excitement around reading that students will literally "beg" to have more SSR time (Lee, 2011, p. 216).

Integration of SSR with Lesson Planning

SSR programs should also be linked to the learning objectives that teachers develop for their classes. Too often, independent reading is criticized as having no connection to the content that educators impart to their students through more direct avenues of instruction. However, there is nothing inherent in the concept of SSR that requires it to be implemented as a standalone activity detached from all other learning that is happening in the classroom. Quite the contrary, a well-designed SSR program gives teachers the flexibility to integrate the concepts and skills that anchor their lesson plans with texts that actually resonate with their students. In this way, SSR does not take time away from classroom learning; it offers opportunities for students to apply course content in a meaningful way using books that are relevant to them.

There is no single way to achieve this integration. It varies widely based upon the knowledge and skills being developed in the classroom. For example, a series of lessons on literary devices used in narrative writing such as mood or tone might be integrated with SSR by creating short journal prompts requiring students to identify the words or phrases in their own books that illustrate those concepts and reflect on how those words make them feel (Morgan & Wagner, 2013). Alternatively, a teacher might reinforce a unit on metacognitive reading strategies such as predicting, questioning, or visualizing by asking students to practice those strategies during SSR time and then share their experience with a partner (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2006). Again, there is plenty of room for flexibility in the specific approach. The important point is to use SSR as a tool to reinforce classroom learning objectives by allowing students to implement the skills they are being asked to master through self-selected texts that they find personally engaging.

Teacher Modeling of Independent Reading

Finally, it is essential for teachers to model the behavior that they want their students to adopt during SSR. As tempting as it may be, SSR is not a time to catch up on email, grade papers, or take attendance. By engaging in these activities, teachers undermine their own cause by signaling that there are other more important activities than reading. If SSR is to be successful, teachers must stand up at the front of the class and read alongside their students. This practice fosters positive reading attitudes both by setting a clear example of classroom expectations and telegraphing nonverbally that reading is engaging and worthwhile.

Regrettably, while most teachers tend to believe in the motivational aspect of modeling, many of them fail to do it. Loh (2009), for example, conducted a ten-week study of fifty teachers in a primary school in Singapore, all of whom reported that they believed their role during SSR was to model reading for their students. Amazingly, less than five percent of them actually read during SSR time on any given day (Loh, 2009). This can be the death knell to an effective SSR program because studies have shown that modeling increases both the percentage of students who participate in SSR as well as the amount of time they devote to reading (Fisher, 2004; Meth & Hintze, 2003). As with any aspect of education, students learn and adopt new behaviors by watching other people perform them. SSR is no exception. Teachers demonstrate a conviction that reading is pleasurable and meaningful when they take the time to engage with a book while asking their students to do the same.

Conclusion

SSR is hardly a novel concept in education. However, it has taken on markedly new significance due to the unprecedented pace of technological achievement that has produced attention-grabbing devices designed to court students of all ages. Finding ways to get students invested in reading is critical due to the fierce competition amongst the unparalleled number of ways for them to spend their free time. If educators are to be successful in promoting reading in a digital environment, they must be able to show their students that getting wrapped up in a good book is not the historical equivalent of their parents walking to school barefoot five miles in the

snow. Instead, it can be just as pleasurable as seeking out that next like on Instagram or dropping into one more battle on Fortnight. An effectively structured SSR program – one that teaches students how to select appropriate texts, allows them to share what they are reading, encourages them to use their books as a platform to apply skills learned in the classroom, and models what it means to be an independent reader – is a large part of the solution. SSR promotes positive, lifelong reading habits by helping students to develop a love of books and appreciate the world beyond the constant beck and call of their digital screens.

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About the Author

David O'Brien holds a Master of Education from the University of Toledo and teaches English at St. John's Jesuit High School. David previously spent twenty years as an attorney specializing in criminal defense. During his free time, he enjoys skiing, volleyball, and playing with his two labs, Lilly and Lola.