Reading Takes You Places: A Study of a Web-based Summer Reading Program

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This study looks at the effects of a Web-based summer reading program on the reading behaviors and attitudes of high school students. The school librarian and five English teachers based the program content and Web site on reading and Web design research. The study investigates whether the technology-based program had positive effects on student reading, and, if so, which elements of the program emerge as beneficial. The study takes place in a high school of 2,000 students, grades nine through twelve. A purposive random sample of 288 students and 11 teachers ensured representation of students from each of the three homogeneously grouped tracks: high-, average-, and low-achieving students. Data were collected through student surveys and teacher interviews. Findings show that students showed satisfaction with the online summer reading program, although low-achieving students and boys reported lower rates of satisfaction. Most students did not take advantage of the interactive technical aspects of the Web site. The mixed responses of teachers point to the need to establish the purpose of summer reading as a foundational concept for building and revising summer reading programs.
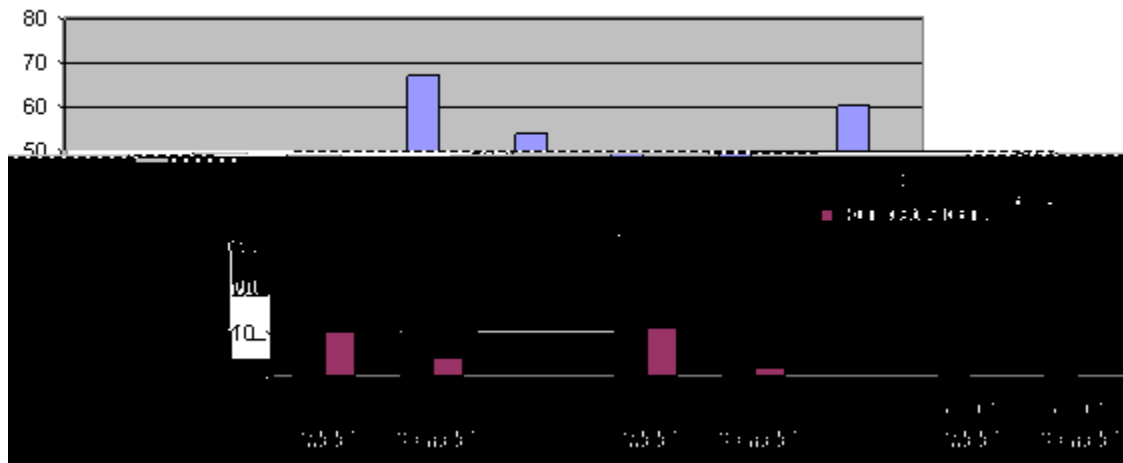
Does Summer Reading Matter?

The "summer effect" on student achievement is well-researched: "The long summer vacation breaks the rhythm of instruction, leads to forgetting, and requires a significant amount of review when students return to school in the fall" (Cooper 2003, 2). Research findings have consistently reported that: (1) student learning declines or remains the same during the summer months; and (2) the magnitude of the change differs by socioeconomic status (Malach and Rutter 2003).

A meta-analysis of thirty-nine studies examined the effects of summer vacation on standardized test scores (Cooper et al. 1996). Findings indicate that summer learning loss equaled at least one month of instruction as measured by grade-level equivalents on standardized test scores. Family income emerged as the best predictor of loss in reading comprehension and word recognition. On some measures, many children from middle class and affluent families showed gains in reading achievement over the summer, but all income levels showed lower reading comprehension scores. Disadvantaged children showed the greatest losses, with a loss of three months of grade level equivalency during the summer months each year, compared with an average of one month loss by middle-income children when reading and math performance are combined.

Alexander and Entwisle (1996) reported that the achievement gap between rich2 0 747poor children, as measured by test scores, increases throughout the elementary years. The difference between high-low   -income children's reang scores on the California Achievement Test, as a percent of the staard deviaion of scores, grew from 68 percent in first gra, to 98 percent in third gra, to 114 percent in eighth grae. The "faucet theory" (Entwisle, Alexander,2 0 747Olson 2000) suggests that opportunities to learn2 0 747access educational resources are turned on during the school yea for all students. As a result, learning gains mae during the school yea are remakably simila for students from different socia 0 747economic backgrounds (Entwisle, Alexander and Olson 1997; Heyns 1978; Murnane 1975). However,2whenains mand3(s)-1(c)4(or)3(e

titles (Williams 2002). Among the fifty-seven lists studied, two did not list titles, merely giving a reading assignment; the remaining fifty-five lists contained anywhere from three to three hundred titles, usually organized by grade level (Williams 2002). Annotations appear on twenty-seven lists, mostly one-liners or short summaries (Williams 2002). Only authors and titles appear on twenty-two lists, and four lists cited titles only (Williams 2002). Despite the visual culture embraced by Generation Y students, many reading lists do not contain colorful graphics. Commonly, summer reading lists do not even reflect student input for title choices. Williams (2002) found that the lists she studied ranged from 43 percent to 92 percent fiction. This is a common school practice that disenfranchises boys as readers, as their preference is usually nonfiction (Gurian 2001). Only two school districts in Williams. 1998) as valid honors students.

Figure 2: Participants and Non-Participants

Summer Reading Participation

Ten percent of students reported they did not participate in the program. In total, 14 percent of the male respondents and 4 percent of the female respondents did not participate (figures 3 and 4). Of the twenty-seven students who reported non-participation, 78 percent were male and 22 percent were female. CP1s accounted for 52 percent; 48 percent were CP2s, and none were Honors. Non-participants by grade level were: six ninth graders, eight tenth graders, eight eleventh graders, and five twelfth graders. Grade eleven and twelve students had a higher rate of non-participation (14 percent each), compared with grades nine (7 percent) and ten (8 percent).
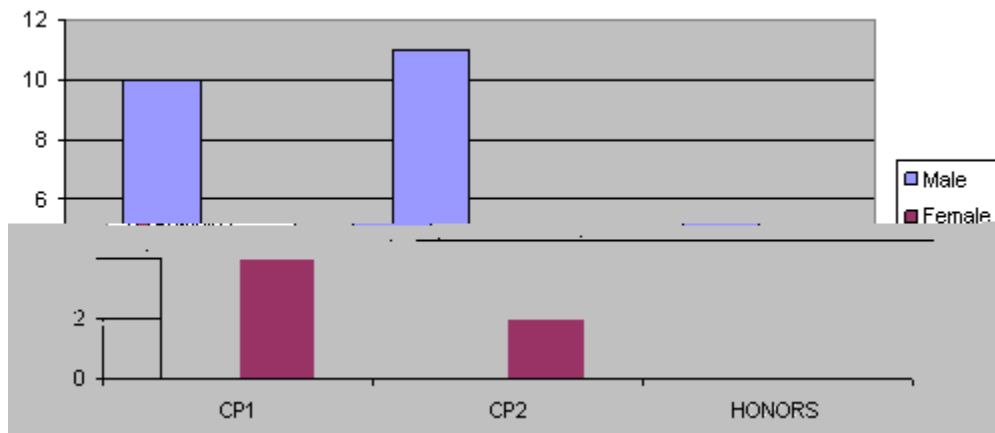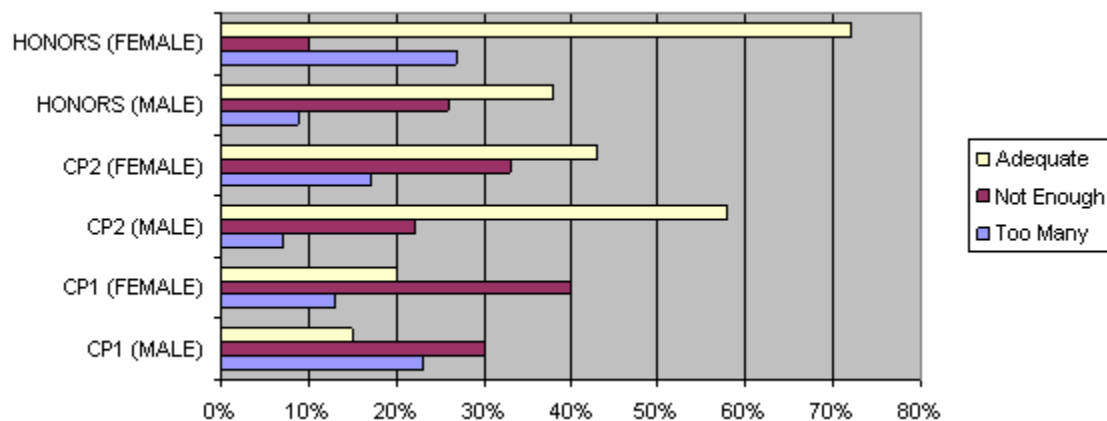
Figure 3: Profile of Non-Participants by Ability Level

Figure 4: Profile of Non-Participants by Grade Level

Figure 6: Student Satisfaction with Book Lists

When asked how they liked the new grade-specific lists, 66 percent expressed satisfaction. A similar pattern appeared across all three levels: 50 percent of CP1 students, 60 percent of CP2 students, and 68 percent of Honors students. Satisfaction rates from girls (62 percept) and boys (57 percent) did not show a significant difference. Four percent of students indicated they prefer grade-specific lists; 6 percent of students did not mind whether or not the lists were grade specific; 25 percent did not answer this question, and 5 percent gave unclear or invalid answers. No CP1 students preferred the grade-specific lists, and only 3 percent of CP2 students and six percent of Honors students preferred the old list.

Access to the online reading lists depended on computer and Internet access. Print lists were available in the school library and town bookstores, and students could visit public libraries to access lists. Thirteen percent of students did not answer the question about their access to computers during the summer; 79 percent reported access. Nine percent (two CP1, fourteen CP2, and seven Honors students) reported that access to a computer and the Internet was a problem because they "needed a ride to the public library [to use the Internet]" and they preferred "a print version of the lists." No significant gender difference was found regarding computer access.

Reading Interests and Book Selection Behaviors

Respondents reported a total of 922 books read in the past summer. They reported 630 titles used for reading projects. Thirty-two of the titles were not included in the analysis because of illegible handwriting, incomplete or incorrect titles, or respondents' inability to recall titles. Five hundred and ninety eight books were then classified into three categories: realistic and historical fiction (70 percent); fantasy and science fiction (6 percent); and nonfiction (12 percent). The significant differences between realistic and historical fiction and the other two categories may be explained partly by students' reading preferences or by lists themselves, which contain more realistic and historical fiction. Among the twelve book lists, only one was devoted to nonfiction, and another list to fantasy and science fiction. The books they had read but not used for projects (290 books) also may affect the findings if students chose different types of books for non-project reading. Students may simply prefer fiction to nonfiction in their leisure or summer reading.

Some interesting findings are noted here. Nonfiction books appear to be more appealing to male students. Nearly two thirds of the nonfict titles reported are reported by male students. On average, 13 percent of female students and 25 percent of male students report reading at least one nonfiction book. Second, reading ability, again, seems to be a more influential factor. While only one CP1 (male) student, or 4 percent, reports reading one nonfiction title, 22 percent (27 out of 121) of CP2 students and 33 percent (35 out of 107) of Honors students did so. CP2 and Honors students apparently read more nonfiction books. It is possible that CP1 students have difficulty reading nonfiction books because they are the ones labeled as "low achieving" that encountered difficulty on standardized tests, which contain short, out-of-context, and information-loaded passages. It also is possible that CP1 students prefer fiction for other reasons. Fiction may better meet their reading needs and interests. Fiction has identifiable characters and well-structured development of events, and it is likely that class readings and remedial instruction in class focus on fiction. Nonfiction may be perceived as boring to students with poor vocabulary and word recognition.

Reading Activities

Another important feature of this Web-based reading program is the provision of more than forty project choices that contain a variety of language-, art-, and computer-based activities. Some examples include write an epilogue and/or prologue to the book, describing events that could have taken place before and after the plot of the book, describe what you think happened to the main character after the book ended, and "blogging."

Although students generally liked the book choices, the satisfaction rate of the project choices (38 percent) was not high compared with the dissatisfaction rate (28 percent). Eight percent gave mixed responses, such as "it was interesting, but some were boring" and "some were good, but some were really weird." Twenty-two percent did not comment. There is a similar dissatisfaction rate across the three levels, but the reasons for the content are different: While CP1 students complained about the amount of project choices ("too many to choose") and about the time they had to spend ("too time-consuming"), the complaints from CP2 and Honors students focused more on the projects themselves "They are boring," "they are way too easy," and "they are no better than the traditional book report." Interestingly, none of the respondents, not even those who were unhappy with the "easy" projects, reported using the alternatives: reading books from the colleges they were considering, or joining summer reading at other universities, or blogging. What is revealed here is that different strategies may be necessary for different students in determining their project choices. CP1 students seemed to need more specific guidance and step-by-step instructions about what the projects are and how to finish them in a timely fashion. CP2 and Honors students, however, may need assistance to be more discerning in their decision-making and to think about what is best for them.

Reading Experiences

On average, students agreed that a Web-based summer reading program enriched their reading experiences. More than half enjoyed the freedom to browse and select among a variety of book lists. Students reported some of their most rewarding achievements from the program. They read more books than they had read last summer. Because of the variety of book choices, students were more likely to find what was of interest to them, and so read more than in previous years. Students reported that they learned a variety of things, such as "vocabulary," speed, and how to

Teachers also identified a practical problem related to their professional role as English teachers whose major duties are to teach students to read and write better. They are trained to assess students' reading and writing performance. Many kids chose the artistic option. Teacher T commented, "I think art is wonderful, but I'm an English teacher, and I want something more geared toward writing ... How do I check that they've read something if I have to evaluate some expressions [art works] that I have no background at all? what you know and what you don't know as a teacher."

Would this program, in the long run, benefit more students than the tradore

network of public libraries. Nor did they use virtual bookstores, preferring to visit local town stores. They also did not take a

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