

Literacy Commonalities: An Analysis of the Literacy Journeys of Anjali Haripriyan, Christopher Silva, Marcos Aceves, and Brittany Gore

Introduction

Despite having varied experiences and growing up in different environments, our four group members learned that we share more experiences than we think. Through extensive comparisons of our Literacy Profiles and artifacts, our group has noted many common themes and recurring trends. We have chosen four common themes to further explore and research: our shared positive literacy sponsors, negative sponsors, literacy techniques, and the effects of our career choices on our literacy (and vice-versa). We realized that regardless of the experiences we've had throughout our lives, each of us currently views literacy in a positive light. The questions we have posed to further understand these themes are the following: Who were the common positive sponsors and what did they do to improve our literacy? What caused our negative literacy experiences and how did it shape us and our viewing of reading? What techniques help us read and write better? How have our career choices impacted our current literacy habits? These questions will reveal more about why practices and attitudes towards literacy change over time, and how they shaped the positive outlook we each have today.

Common Positive Sponsors

As an individual grows through their literacy journey, they encounter various literacy sponsors that provide them with either positive or negative experiences. After analyzing our respective literacy journeys, we recognized a crucial commonality: our parents as positive literacy sponsors. Although we did not share the same family or household dynamics growing up, our parents were the first sponsors to push us to grow.

For some of us, reading was a large part of our household. One group member's parents would make efforts such as taking them to the library every week while another group member's parents would read to them before bed. Although some of us lived in reading-heavy households, others grew up in households where reading and writing wasn't as huge. One group member explained that his dad had dyslexia, so he never pushed him and his brother to read. Despite this

difference in family dynamic, this group member still listed his parents as one of his biggest positive literacy sponsors. His dad was the one who taught him how to drive and be a good person in society, while his mom taught him how to cook and speak Spanish. Although his parents didn't push him to specifically read, they taught him valuable literacy skills that come with driving and cooking, such as being able to follow directions quickly and carefully. This common trend shows that having generally supportive parents (even if they do not specifically push for reading) leads to a positive outlook on various kinds of literacy.

This idea is more expanded on in Brandt's book, "Sponsors of Literacy". In the book, Brandt compares the literacy journeys of Raymond Branch and Dora Lopez, whose household lives differed significantly. While Branch grew up in an affluent family, Lopez grew up with less resources for literacy and education. Branch was a European-American whose father was a professor and whose mother was a real estate executive. Since his father was a professor, he loved to play around with the computers at his science lab. Branch's parents gifted him his first personal computer for Christmas at the age of twelve, which allowed him to improve his skills and interest. Lopez, on the other hand, was a Mexican-American whose father was a clerk at a university, and whose mother worked at a bookstore.

Although Lopez didn't have many resources around her, she used her mother's help to find Spanish books at the bookstore to teach herself how to read and write in Spanish. Despite having less resources and a less affluent family than Branch, both Lopez's and Branch's parents played a significant role in shaping their positive literacy experiences. Branch's parents helped in a more direct sense by providing him with a computer early on and exposing him to their workplaces, while Lopez's parents helped her gain access to what Brandt calls the "second-hand technology market". The literacy skills that both Lopez and Branch gained through the encouragement of their parents was extremely useful in their careers. Brandt mentions that Branch's skills paid off during "late-century transformations in communication technology that created a boomtown need for programmers and software writers". On the other hand, Lopez's biliterate skills paid off in "government-sponsored youth programs and commercial enterprises that, in the 1990s, were absorbing surplus migrant workers into a low-wage, urban service economy". While Lopez's and Branch's literacy skills differed significantly, they were able to apply what they learned to grow in different areas.

Similarly, the group member that grew up with less reading around the house and more insight into social interactions would later be able to apply those unique literacy skills in the appropriate settings. After comparing the stories in Brandt's essay to our stories, it became evident that the commonality we all shared with Lopez and Branch was our parents' support and encouragement in our literacy. No matter what kind of literacy they supported, the important part was that they made an effort to be present in our literacy journeys. Although we all had a list of negative literacy sponsors as well throughout our journeys, the foundation we gained from our parents allowed us to eventually view literacy in a positive light.

Negative Reading Experiences

Although we all listed our parents as positive literacy sponsors, we also shared a few negative sponsors. These negative sponsors contributed to our unpleasant reading experiences, causing us all to view reading in a negative light for a period of time. The question we then posed was where did these experiences stem from and what caused us all to view reading in a negative way? Although it stemmed from different places for each of us, we all shared the end result: a lack of interest in reading. A few of us associate reading with a negative experience due to things like our family comparing us to our older sibling's reading abilities, not being exposed to literature written by people of color, high school English classes forcing us to read genres we disliked, or even English courses not being rigorous enough. Whatever it is, certain experiences within someone's life can have a detrimental effect on the way they feel about reading. As a result, students tend to read less for fun, and only associate reading with the negative experiences it has brought them.

While researching the ideas behind this concept, we found an article that provides evidence for what could have caused the reduction in the time spent reading for leisure purposes between certain age groups. An article from the *Washington Post* states that sometimes students see reading as something that is required for class which makes it feel like work and not for leisure purposes. And this causes their attitude towards reading to change; negatively. Not only does this prove the truth about students losing interest in reading and having a negative experience with it but the numbers show it as well. Another article from *Cardinal Points* talks about a test where, "In 2004, about 28 percent of Americans age[d] 15 and older read books for pleasure. In 2017, the number dropped to 19 percent, meaning the average reading time per person fell significantly, according to the Washington Post." This shows that the average person who spends reading as a leisure activity has definitely decreased which could have all stemmed from the idea that reading is associated with negative experiences as well as the attitude towards reading has changed.

When applying the findings of this study to our group, we noticed that the negative experiences we faced eventually had a positive effect on us. Being forced to read in school helped us understand what genres we didn't like, which pushed us to think about what we liked instead. Knowing what kinds of literature we disliked was as important as understanding what kinds of literature we favored, because it expanded our experiences with reading.

For example, one of our group members was angered by the fact that there weren't enough POC authors in the literature she was required to read. Although she disliked the lack of diversity, this negative literacy experience motivated her to expand her reading to authors of color. This led her to take Black Literature classes during college which inspired her to explore the world of African American literature.

Common Techniques for Scanning/understanding Text

During high school, students are taught how to engage with the text they are reading by using techniques such as annotating, re-reading, scanning, taking notes, and more. While some of us have had both positive and negative experiences with the techniques taught in school, we all see it as a useful tool for our careers. The most common strategies found within our Literacy Profiles was scanning the text and annotating. Scanning for headers and subheaders helps the reader get an idea of what the text is about before diving right into the material. A group member mentions how scanning not only gives them a rough idea of what the text is about, but also gives them the capacity to pace themselves as they read.

Another prevalent reading technique is annotation. Annotating gives the reader an opportunity to engage with the text in various different ways. Since our group consists of STEM majors and English majors, annotation is a handy technique when it comes to reading and studying. As stated by one group member, annotating helps her understand the text on a deeper level and keeps her engaged with the material. It helps the reader keep track of the argument and the literary devices that are used to help the author prove their point. Engaging with the text makes the reader feel as though they are conversing with the author, and eliminates the “fake reading syndrome”. It also allows the reader to have control over their writing and thoughts. One group member explains in their Literacy Profile that they feel a sense of satisfaction when they fill the page with colorful highlights. This also helps them stay motivated to understand the reading, and assists them in formulating their own arguments in preparation for a paper.

In a document produced by Purdue University, Fort Wayne states, that annotating aids in comprehension and retention, increases concentration, and seldom necessitates a re-read of the material.” Since our group members often come across less interesting STEM or English readings, annotating helps us stay connected with the author’s message, and keeps our mind awake as we read. We also occasionally come across difficult or unknown words, so writing the definition down within the margins brings our attention to the importance of the word within its context. Annotating also helps with the pace of reading, because it forces us to slow down and think about the idea the author is trying to convey.

In their Literacy Profile, one group member describes that although learning the process of annotating was strenuous, they soon became cognizant of how beneficial annotating can be. They mentioned that it is not just busy work, but a strategy that will aid them in the future to accomplish their goals. Learning the process of annotation helped them understand that there is inspiration in rigorous work and that they can only go forward in this process. Using these reading techniques becomes an excellent tool for studying. The beauty of annotation as one

group member states is that “it gives you the freedom to be creative in a non-creative moment, because you get to come up with your own marking system.”

Literacy in Careers

After comparing our literacy history, we noticed that our college and career choices have had a huge impact on our current literacy habits, and vice versa. From our shared negative experiences in high school, our time in college has been an improvement for the most part. Through further review of artifacts and interviews of our group members, we have noticed how our passion for our future helped us overcome the negative high school reading experiences we faced. After experiencing college, we all realized that reading is not just used for the sake of completing an assignment, but for propelling us towards our future goals. Our negative reading experiences caused us to place less importance on reading before college, however we have all faced situations within our majors that showed how reading improves our analytical thinking and enhances our imagination for problem solving scenarios. For example, one of our group members who is majoring in Engineering and aspiring to start her own company, realized that she enjoys reading about other people’s startup journeys. Another group member majoring in Cell Biology realized he enjoyed reading medical journals that his grandpa sent him after he declared his major. While stepping into college has helped us view literacy in a more positive light, the skills we gained in our early literacy has in turn helped our college journeys.

A prime example of this is how our negative experiences before college in fact pushed us to find our most memorable positive experiences. As mentioned before, one of our members is now engrossed in Black literature after noticing the lack of African American authors in her high school English classes. Another member majoring in Electrical Engineering has made a stronger effort to understand what genres she enjoys despite constantly being compared to her sister’s advanced reading level. Our other two group members are chemistry and cell biology majors who have both had hardships with staying interested in high school readings, however after experiencing the visualization of scientific readings, they made more of an effort to read. These interests were only cultivated because of the experiences we faced before college that pushed us to grow.

In both of these group member’s journeys, their motivation to seek readings that they enjoyed in turn benefited their academic performance as well. The knowledge and reading skills they gained from these books by African American authors and Engineering startups respectively, allowed them to improve in tackling readings they were assigned in school. Kevin Roozen describes the importance of using non-academic literacy interests to excel in academia in his book “Tracing Trajectories of Practice”. He says that “encouraging learners to view [extradisciplinary practices] as flexible resources for creating, maintaining, coordinating, extending, altering, and perhaps even productively disrupting networks that provide access to

disciplinary expertise”. Even though we still sometimes face readings that we just see as regular assignments, our group members are more motivated than ever because of how our non-academic and academic experiences trained us to seek literacy we favor after grappling with what we do not favor.

What do these trends show?

Studying and identifying the common themes throughout our literacy journeys proved one main concept: every experience we faced was a moment of growth. Our findings showed that despite growing up in different environments, we all used similar resources such as family and school to shape our views on reading and writing. Regardless of how our household dynamics were, we used the support of our parents to stay connected with the kinds of literacy they taught us. Despite disliking school readings, the annotation techniques we learned helped us engage in literacy that we wanted to explore in college. The literacy experiences we gained with our families and school shaped the way we view literacy within our careers. Literacy in our respective fields can appear in many different forms such as scientific journals, formal legal statements, and even poems. It is because literacy can come in these forms that we as a group can learn to enjoy reading based on what style suits us. We have concluded that it is entirely normal for an individual to dislike reading, especially if it was forced upon them, because for us, we each found our path back to reading on our own due to the experiences we carry from our positive and negative literacy sponsors.

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