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Why my students don’t read any more

By

**JEREMY ADAMS**

Most of us who grew up in the United States before the advent of smartphones and social media can remember adults using phrases like “serious reading” or can name people in our orbit who claimed certain books changed their lives. I can still vividly recall teachers, friends and family members insisting I read this book or that poem, usually for reasons I had yet to understand.

Early on, we were imbued with the notion that reading mattered. Not because it empowered us to effectively absorb information or positioned us to do well on a future standardized exam.

It mattered because the books we read often had a lasting and powerful impact on the people we would become.

In middle school, I greatly disappointed my English teacher father by telling him I had no love for the written word.

But in high school I discovered the popular fiction of Stephen King, Dean Koontz and Tom Clancy. In college, what I read and, more importantly, why I read, became central themes in my search for knowledge. I found myself hypnotized by the grandeur of Tolstoy,

the longing of Wordsworth and the timeless wisdom of writers whose names are often associated with the classics.

I discovered when I took the time to read deeply, life brimmed with possibilities and surged with urgency in a way it never had. It is one of the reasons I became a teacher, to share this exhilaration with young minds.

Yet in my two decades of teaching high school in California’s Central Valley, perhaps the biggest change I have noticed is that the belief that reading both enlarges and enlivens life itself has largely vanished from the lives of my young students.

Today’s teenagers certainly read all day — memes, posts, tweets — but it is all of a transitory, casual nature.

Reading books has been sacrificed to the tyranny of texting and the dizzying array of social media platforms.

In the 1970s, teens read three times as

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many books as today. In 1980, 60% of high school seniors reported that they read a newspaper, magazine or book on a daily basis for pleasure; by 2016 that number had dropped to 16%. Teenagers are more likely to read books at 13 than 17.

None of this would surprise modern classroom teachers, who can attest that the ubiquitous presence of cellphones and other devices in the lives of students is a zeitgeist-defining development that has fundamentally altered the American classroom. Students are perpetually, almost manically, distracted in class and at home. The ability to focus on a single task — studying, taking notes and, yes, reading a book — has largely been lost.

For almost two decades I loved recommending books to students depending on their particular interests or the problems they shared with me. Experiencing teenage angst? Read Viktor Frankl’s “Man’s Search for Meaning.” Having trouble figuring out what to do with your life? Read Tolstoy’s “The Death of Ivan Ilych.” Does life feel debilitatingly unfair? Read early sixth century philosopher Boethius’ “The Consolation of Philosophy.”

Recommending books worked because students intuitively understood philosopher Michel de Montaigne’s dictum, “I speak the minds of others only to speak my own mind better.”

In fall 1998, I began my teaching career with five classes of freshman English. After one class, a student asked me two simple questions: “Why are we required to read these stories? What’s the point?” I no longer remember my response, but I have never forgotten his words to me. “I never really thought of reading like that before,” he said. “It really gives me something to think about.”

In that moment, I fell in love with teaching. From then on, spreading

the gospel about the transformative power of reading found its way into most of my classes on most days.

Then the era of the smartphone invaded the classroom, and everything changed.

Suddenly I was in a desperate struggle for my students’ attention. Phones began appearing on desks in the middle of class. When students were told to put their phones away, bathroom requests shot through the roof. The time they reported it took to complete their homework was much longer than it used to be.

Many students used to leisurely read a book or talk to a friend in the few minutes before class. Now they endlessly scroll through their social media feeds, often in isolated silence. When I recommend a book or speak glowingly about reading, their eyes start to glaze over.

Consider all of the benefits the habit of reading ushers into the lives of those who practice it — and then take them away. A generation that has filled its time with the endless frivolity of pixelated screens will live in a world that is smaller. They will lose empathy. Their imaginations will be stunted. Their dreams will become prosaic. They will become estranged from many of the treasures that only readers can comprehend.

Some of my more reflective students are aware of what is happening to them.

Two years ago, during the last week of school, I asked a class of high school seniors what advice they would give their freshman selves. The class valedictorian raised his hand and matter-of-factly intoned, “I would find a cliff and throw my phone off of it.” This young man knew there was a gap between who he was and what he could be. He recognized he had to do something drastic.

Do the rest of us?

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