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UNH Professor's New Book Outlines Why Students Learn More By Reading Slowly

November 30, 2011

DURHAM, N.H. – The nation’s school children have made little progress recently in advancing their reading skills, but a new book by a University of New Hampshire professor who specializes in literacy aims to change that.

Thomas Newkirk, professor of English at UNH, suggests that students get more enjoyment out of and have greater success with reading when they slow down. Newkirk outlines how to boost student enjoyment of reading in his new book “The Art of Slow Reading” (2011 Heinemann).

“This book challenges popular notions of reading—the idea that quick, extractive reading is the goal for students. I argue that traditional acts of ‘slow reading’—memorization, performance, annotation, and elaboration—are essential for deep, pleasurable, thoughtful reading,” Newkirk says.

The book rests on a simple but powerful belief—good readers practice the art of paying attention. Building on memoir, research, and many examples of classroom practice, Newkirk highlights six time-honored practices of reading—performance, memorization, centering, problem-finding, reading like a writer, and elaboration—to help readers engage in thoughtful, attentive reading.

“Good readers are active and strategic—they pose questions, build predictions, visualize, infer, and fit what they read into wider patterns. They monitor their reading: in effect, they can watch themselves determine when something doesn’t make sense or when they have lost the drift of what they have read. They pay attention. They benefit from the demonstrations of skilled readers. And good readers read a lot—there is an undeniable correlation between reading practice and reading skill. It follows that good readers take some pleasure in reading; it is functional for them, and not merely some task performed for others,” Newkirk says.

The 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress reading test, which is mandated by Congress, was given to 213,100 fourth-graders and 168,200 eighth-graders last spring. On average, eighth-graders scored one point higher in 2011 compared with 2009, and fourth-grader scores were unchanged in the same period. The national assessment in reading has been administered every few years since the early 1990s, with average scores in reading rising only four points at the fourth-grade level and only five points at the eighth-grade level since 1992.

Newkirk says his book is particularly useful to teachers in that it provides proven, concrete practices that have promoted real depth in reading. The book demonstrates how these practices enhance the reading of a variety of texts, from "Fantastic Mr. Fox" and "The Great Gatsby" to letters from the IRS.

A confessed slow reader, Newkirk says there is real pleasure in slowing down. “We can gain some pleasures and meanings no other way. Many kids get the message that reading is a race – that good readers are fast readers.”

“Schools need to take a stand for an alternative to an increasingly hectic digital environment where so many of us read and write in severely abbreviated messages and through clicks of the mouse. Like the
slow food movement, we can make a case on the basis of pleasure. The term taste applies to both literacy and eating. And to taste, we have to slow down,” Newkirk says.

Thomas Newkirk is a professor of English at UNH. He is the author and editor of a number of books, including “Holding On to Good Ideas in a Time of Bad Ones: Six Literacy Principles Worth Fighting For” (2009), “Teaching the Neglected ‘R’” (2007), and “Misreading Masculinity” (2004), which was cited by Instructor Magazine as one of the most significant books for teachers in the past decade. Newkirk is a former teacher of at-risk high school students in Boston, former director of UNH’s freshman English program, and the director and founder of its New Hampshire Literacy Institutes. He has studied literacy learning at a variety of educational levels, from preschool to college.

The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea, and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship public institution, enrolling 12,200 undergraduate and 2,300 graduate students.

PHOTO
Tom Newkirk, professor of English at the University of New Hampshire and author of “The Art of Slow Reading.”
http://www.unh.edu/news/img/newkirk.jpg

EXCERPT FROM “THE ART OF SLOW READING”

GRAPHIC
Slow Reading
Credit: Bridget Finnegan, UNH New and Emerging Media
http://www.unh.edu/news/img/slowreading.jpg

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