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Acquisition and retention: The similar factors implicated in the development and maintenance of reading skill, habit, and preference

Abstract:
Data from a recent study of adult readers suggests that genre preference formation is, like skill acquisition and habit formation, partly mediated by social, environmental and experiential factors. Preference formation can be viewed as an integral part of the reading lifetime and as a particular form of lifelong learning.

Résumé : Les données d'une étude récente sur les lecteurs adultes suggèrent que la formation préférentielle de genre, comme l'acquisition de compétences ou la formation des habitudes, est souvent influencée par des facteurs sociaux, environnementaux et expérimentaux. Cette formation préférentielle peut être considérée comme une partie intégrante de la lecture permanente et une forme particulière d'apprentissage continu.

1 Introduction

Genre preference, a reader's liking for a particular type of story, is often approached as a function of characteristics of the texts (Ross, 2001). In LIS we look into individual books or stories or into the genre as a whole for themes, appeal factors and similarities to explain what draws a reader to repeatedly seek books in a particular fictional category (Herald, 2000; Saricks, 2001). Critics and scholars in literature, sociology and cultural studies examine texts in order to discuss the political or social influences or approaches, and the message of the text whether intentional or not (Wendland, 1979; Radway, 1984; Disch, 1998).

When the reader is included in the investigation, it is as the recipient of the message, the source of data on the act of reading or the source of data about what is appealing about a particular genre (Holland and Sherman, 1986; Long, 1993). The reader is involved in the investigation by virtue of having a preference already formed. The question "Why does the reader have this preference?" seems to lead to an almost recursive response: "the reader prefers the genre for these factors resident in the texts, which are the reasons the reader prefers to read these texts."

But what if the question is not "why does the reader have this preference?" but "how did the reader develop this preference?" Data from a recent study of adult readers of science fiction and fantasy suggest that within certain parameters, readers may develop preferences in a manner very similar to the way they acquire reading skills and the habit of reading for pleasure.

2 Adult Readers of Science Fiction and Fantasy Study – Theory & Method

The study used qualitative methods and was influenced by reader response theory, primarily reading as a transaction (Rosenblatt, 1938; Fish, 1980). Stated simply, the transaction theory of reading proposes that meaning is not inherent in the text, but is created by the interaction of the reader (in the contexts of attitude, emotion, experience and prior knowledge) with the text. Different readers may interpret the same text differently, and an individual may interpret a single text differently on different occasions. The transactional view of reading suggests that the experience and meaning of a text, and possibly its appeal, are best understood through the reader rather than the text.

The method used a combination of an interview, two structured tasks and a questionnaire to investigate the reading history, reading experience, reading goals and genre perceptions of the participants. Eighteen men and fourteen women took part in the study, ranging in age from 22 to 46 years. Selected through an accidental snowball method (Denzin 1989, 93; Dixon, Bouma and Atkinson, 1987), participants included readers who were part of the social community associated with science fiction and fantasy ("science fiction fandom") and readers who were not then part of the social community.

The unstructured interview (Lofland and Lofland, 1984) focused on reading history, reading preference, and the perception of the genres of science fiction and fantasy and was intended to elicit data in the readers' own language. Supplementary data on definitions of genre and subgenre were gathered by a card-sort and a book-selection exercise, and a short questionnaire collected basic demographic and leisure activities information. The data collection sessions were audiotaped and the interviews transcribed. The interview data was coded for emergent categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) using qualitative data analysis software and analysed in light of the original research questions.

3 Adult Readers of Science Fiction and Fantasy Study – Factors in Preference Formation

The purpose of the study was to explore how adult readers perceive science fiction and fantasy, and to explore what influences adult readers' preference for science fiction and/or fantasy. The expectation was that readers in the study would discuss their preferences in terms of what they expected/looked for from their reading of science fiction and/or fantasy, and why they felt the genres satisfied their expectations. While readers did discuss their preferences in these ways, other influences (habit, use of category as filter, social networks and domain knowledge) also appeared to come into play in maintaining a preference (Kofmel, 2002).

What also emerged from the examination of the reader histories was a pattern of repeated successful contacts with genre texts, often socially mediated, as part of the process of becoming a reader of science fiction and/or fantasy. Although I have not yet tested this possibility, I believe that there is a generalizable structure of developing a genre preference, visible in the context of but not specific to science fiction and fantasy reading. The structure involves the reader's contact with the genre and the development of a focus on the genre. By focus I do not necessarily mean an exclusive concentration. One can be, for example, a science fiction reader without being *only* a science fiction reader. The reader must, however, focus on the genre, that is, see the genre as a category with reading value.

Becoming a preferential reader of a genre requires contact with texts in the genre. To state this seems like highlighting the obvious, but it is less obvious than it appears. Like science fiction and fantasy, most fictional genres are functional categories in other culture media and a preference for or appreciation of the genres in a non-print medium does not assure a related reading preference. A prime example in the science fiction and fantasy study is Heather (33, museum administrator), who while reading unambiguous fantasy and watching science fiction on television and in film, did not *read* science fiction because she felt science fiction books would be too difficult or strange. Not until a teacher made explicit recommendations and connected the films and television she enjoyed with the work of such authors as Asimov and Norton did she discover that science fiction in books was both accessible and enjoyable.

That contact, I think, must include some or all of the following things. I have phrased this in terms of books, but it could also be about short stories.

Encounters
The reader encounters books in the genre/s when they find, are given or are directed to specific titles, to specific authors, or to the genre as a whole. While not a hard and fast rule, it seemed in the science fiction and fantasy study that voracious and omnivorous readers tend to find the texts on their own, while selective or hesitant readers tend to be directed. The encounters must lead to a positive experience. A single encounter may not be sufficient, no matter whether the outcome is positive or negative. A reader may have repeated encounters with the genre before forming a preference or a distaste.

Mentors
The reader may or may not have the assistance of a mentor , a person who guides the reader to a specific text or a group of texts. The mentor may be a family member, a friend, a co-worker, a teacher or a librarian. They may or may not model the behaviour by reading science fiction and/or fantasy themselves. They may or may not discuss genre reading with the reader and they may or may not continue to suggest texts or authors. They may even be a shadow-figure, someone who was responsible for the presence of the books but did not actively guide the reader.

Heather's teacher (noted above) acted as a mentor. For Tony (38, television producer) his first mentor was a school friend. Harry's father is an example of a shadow-mentor. While Harry (37, journalist) talks about his early reading in relationship to his mother, the science fiction books he first encountered belonged to his often absent father, and he specifies that he found the books on "my *father's* bookshelf" (emphasis added).

Collections
Developing preference is likely assisted by encountering a collection, by which I mean a number of texts either grouped together (for example, in a particular bookcase) or identifiable as "like" if dispersed in a larger collection (by spine labels or distinctive publisher marks). Finding a collection allows exposure to not just one text, but enough to begin to build the genre-specific vocabulary of themes and devices. Collection exposure may be especially important for science fiction and fantasy, since both genres have extensive convention sets and specialize in stories of difference (for example, difference from here-and-now, difference from other genres, difference from the readers experience). Collections need not be deliberately provided. Michelle (42, librarian), for

example, remembers her introduction to science fiction via a box of books in the back of a relative's closet.

Association
Although, as noted above, other media interests do not guarantee similar reading interests, preference is likely assisted by association of the new texts to prior or concurrent interests, including other media. The reader makes a connection between the text(s) and something already present in their intellectual, emotional or material life.

Intellectual associations may be to topics of general interest, such as science or history or anthropology, or to more specified topics, such as "the space program," "astronomy," "magic." Conrad (31, graphics designer) associated science fiction with the desire to achieve academically, and with providing models (such as space ships) for his early efforts at drawing.

Emotional associations may be made in finding the story somehow familiar, or challenging, or different, or the story may act as a bridge to some desired state (reading "real" books, reading in the adult section of the library).

Material culture associations may be made to toys or artwork present in the reader's life. Ian (33, engraver) draws such an association to material culture when he connects his early reading of science fiction with his Major Matt Mason astronaut toys and the accompanying aliens.

The reader may also make connections to stories found in another medium, such as comic books, television or film, or even to early childhood reading of fairy tales and children's fantasies. Jaci (34, publishing manager) sees her interest in fantasy as a natural outgrowth of this early reading. Myths, legends, fairy tales and classic children's fantasy seem to have almost the status of a primordial story mass, a pre-existing matter spawning a variety of stories and interests.

Recognition
Preference may be formed when the reader experiences recognition, realizing that this text (or set of texts) is one of a type, of which more individuals may be found. Experience with an identifiable collection comes into play here as well. Moreover, the reader realizes (or assumes, or hopes) that other individuals of this type may provide a similar, satisfying experience. Recognition has the potential to be expansive in two directions, into past reading and into other media. Once the reader has recognized the genre, s/he may recognize that they have in the past read books that "belong" in the genre without knowing them as members of a category. Similarly, the reader may reclassify stories in other media (previously experienced or ongoing into the future) as members of a multi-media category that also includes books in the genre.

Heather's story of how she discovered science fiction reading captures a number of these elements. She describes an early experience with and love of fairy tales, and the connection between the illustrations and her love of dress-up. She overcame a reluctance or apprehension about reading "big books" (chapter books) when her grandmother gave her a copy of *The Princess and the Goblin*, which she devoured, finding it "a fairy tale made big." Here, too, the illustrations played a part. Fantasy became part of her reading repertoire. In her early teens and on into high school she developed an interest in *Star*

Trek, *Star Wars*, and *Space 1999*, in part through her relationship with a friend who liked the shows and movies. Her interest in astronomy brought her into contact with her high school vice principal, who suggested that if she enjoyed *Star Wars* she might like Asimov's *Foundation* or some of Andre Norton's books. She acquired the books by suggesting titles to her siblings as possible Christmas presents (*Foundation* was a gift) and by buying some for herself. Although she was initially "afraid of it because I thought it was just something different" she found that was "exactly what I want … exactly what I've been looking for." Science fiction combined her two loves of fairy tales and of astronomy and it did so "beautifully." "Some people find religion," she says. "I found literature."

Among these factors, association may be the key for why a specific genre creates an appeal. Based on the reading histories recounted in this study, it seems likely that a preference for science fiction may develop through association to interests in science, in the concept of "out there," in possibilities, in the future, in difference. Similarly, a preference for fantasy may develop through association to interests in language, in symbols, in transformation, in mythic magic. An interest in or desire for experiences of other worlds, for something that is not the same as the day-to-day experience, and for stories with wide scope and a range of story possibilities may also form associations for science fiction and for fantasy.

Preference for a genre cannot develop without exposure to the genre, nor without positive experiences with the genre that have points of association to the reader's other interests. The process involves building webs of relationship between texts and between the texts and the rest of the reader's intellectual, emotional, or material life.

Some of these associations, particularly the intellectual and emotional associations, may modulate into the purposeful reasons for continued genre preference, becoming the expectation that the reading the genre satisfies.

Similar factors play into the maintenance of a reading preference. Fiona (31, stay-home parent) identified the change in breadth of her social contacts (mentors) and of the availability of texts (collections) as a reason for her shift to reading mysteries after the birth of her first child. Her primary science fiction reading contacts were her coworkers. As a new mother at home, she relied more heavily on the interests and materials of a smaller circle of readers, particularly her own mother. Repeated encounters with texts that satisfy reader expectations ensure continued interest in a genre, while repeated encounters that increasingly fail to satisfy lead to decreasing interest and ultimately abandonment of the genre. Recognition of story type and category membership becomes a useful selection tool whether used for purpose (this type of book tends to be a satisfying read) or for practicality (there are too many books to choose from, category restrictions reduce overload). Association to other aspects of the reader's life continues in maintenance as the genre's continuing relevance to the reader.

4 Suggested Related Factors in Skill Acquisition & Habit Formation
Similar factors appear in the literature on skill or literacy acquisition and on habit formation. Themes of social interaction and mentoring repeat throughout Carlsen and Sherrill's *Voices of Readers: How We Come to Love Books* (1988), at almost all ages in the contexts both of learning to read and of becoming a habitual reader. Parents, peers,

teachers, grandparents, siblings and librarians model reading behaviours, provide advice or direction, and engage in discussions of reading at most stages of development for the readers in their study. Ross (2001) also notes the involvement of family members in reader histories in her study of avid adult pleasure readers. Gambrell, in her review of the literature on reading motivation in an instructional context (2001), indicates that both theory and observation suggest that social interaction (including mentoring or guidance) has positive effects on reading motivation and achievement. The impact of social factors in the home is also discussed by Heath (1982), and in the classroom by Dyson (1990) and Flint (2000).

Similarly, the reader histories in *Voices of Readers* recount numerous encounters with texts, some successful, some not. Gambrell (2001) and Ross (1995) also note the importance of encounters and the need for repeated success in reading motivation and the development of habit. The function of freely accessible collections in literacy development is observed by Heath (1982) (books in the home) and reported by the readers in Carlsen and Sherril (home, school and libraries). Gambrell isolates access to reading materials as a key theme in education work on developing reading motivation, with an emphasis on classroom libraries.

Association, the making of connections between reading and other elements of the reader's intellectual, emotional, or material life, is cited at various stages of the reading career in *Voices of Readers*. Notable examples include the associations between maturity and book reading (p. 6), between reading interest and play (p. 13), between reading and prestige (p. 13), and between shared reading interests and successful group membership (p. 18). Dyson (1990) suggests that even in classroom work, children's early literacy learning incorporates diverse experiences from both in and out of school, including play, and that the learning experience may be enhanced by helping children make connections amongst these experiences and between the experiences and their literacy efforts. Studies similar to Allen (1979) also suggest the importance of association to reading development. Allen examined the impact of interest on reading skill and concluded that children read at skill levels higher than their usual when reading texts in which they have a higher degree of interest.

6 Factors in Continuity
The adult readers in the science fiction and fantasy study acquired their reading preferences in ways that reflect our understanding of how children become literate and of how people become habitual readers. In short, becoming a reader of a particular genre is both a learning experience and a learning process.

Like other "becomings" in the reading lifetime (skill acquisition, habit formation), genre preference development is mediated by specific factors. These factors differ to some extent in type and/or degree, but fall into the categories of social, environmental, and experiential. The process of developing genre preference may be a refinement and/or reapplication and/or recapitulation of the process of skill acquisition and/or of the development of the reading habit. As an application in later life of meta-lessons learned at the same time as the actual reading skill, a reader's willingness and ability to test and adopt or discard genres may rest on the style and success of that early learning.

The value of this view of genre preference development is the potential for illuminating research in the area and possibly also related practice. As a learning experience and as a component of lifelong learning and thought, genre preference is not a light or frivolous topic. As a reflection or recapitulation of earlier reading-related processes and life stages, genre preference development becomes less of a vague or impenetrable phenomenon and more of an observable behaviour.

Acknowledging the place of preference development in the framework of the reading life may allow clearer investigation or understanding of the role of text factors and the process of making meaning from pleasure-reading in general and from fiction in particular. Research in genre preference development may also provide opportunities for reflection on the earlier stages of learning to read and becoming a reader.

7 Conclusion

While characteristics of stories are part of the process, genre preference formation is not wholly text driven. Genre preference formation is, like skill acquisition and habit formation, mediated by social, environmental and experiential factors. Rather than a separate process, preference formation can be viewed as an integral part of the reading lifetime, and may be a particular form of lifelong learning in which the reader applies skills, tools and strategies acquired and refined in the earlier stages of the reading life.

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