

What our students really read: a comparative study
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I. Introduction

Empirical investigations on readers and reading behaviors are not new. Studies on readers' reactions to both prose and poetry have had a long tradition of research. Richards' experiments in 1929 is one of the earliest works in the area which has been of great impact to the understanding of how readers read. Miall (1990; 1993), looking for a balance between readers' responses and textual properties, later proposed that literary texts possess an intrinsic structure, which can be demonstrated in readers' responses and that effective teaching must be based on a better understanding of the process of this response. Barsch (1991) moved away from the classroom to study young readers reading fiction. He came to the conclusion that the different ways and kinds of reading depend on particular reading interests and suggests that the reading of popular/commercial fiction is different from the reading of canonized literature or of bestsellers. His study revealed that readers of popular/commercial fiction manifest specific forms of literary behavior. Despite the width and depth of these studies, many of the questions which are of greatest concern to the teaching of literary studies still remain unanswered in universities around the world: which texts do students prefer to read and what reasons do they present?

One of the zones of turbulence in the teaching of literature is precisely the assumption that teachers and students share the same preferences and understanding of what literature is. Students are expected to enjoy the literary experience, regardless of how they understand or what they consider literary to be. Zyngier & Shepherd (2001), among other studies, have found out that this assumption is false in the context they investigated. It is true that it is still too early to draw generalizations from these studies, but they serve as a signalling post that for some still unknown reason there has been resistance in acknowledging this fact. Indeed, one of the researchers has experienced some hostility colleagues in literature departments when she reports her results. The most common reaction is for members of the audience to claim that the picture she presents does not reflect their own context. To this reaction the researcher inevitably asks whether any empirical investigation has been carried out and they have not. But how sincere is this claim? Students who study literature will always say they enjoy it for many obvious reasons. But do they truly? If empirical research is not carried out, this situation may bring harmful consequences to the teaching and learning of literature. In this sense, it is of greatest importance that teachers know who the students they deal with are, what their expectations in relation to their studies are, how they define literature, why they study it, what their motivations are, and where they get their motivations from.

This paper is part of an international project being developed in Germany, Brazil and Canada with the objective of investigating the motivations and the expectations of first year university students of literature in order to find out what can be generalized and what is culturally or contextually determined. To this purpose, we analyze the responses to a questionnaire initially designed by Dr. Achim Barsch and his colleagues at the University of Siegen and applied to 30 students in Germany in 1999. It then traveled to Brazil, where it was translated into Brazilian Portuguese and adapted with minor revisions by the research group DICEL (*Discurso e Ciência Empírica da Literatura*) at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, and applied to 129 students (only 122 will be the object of the present analysis)

(Zyngier et alii., 2001). The same questionnaire in Portuguese was applied to students in Portugal and the results have been reported by Barbosa (2002). In 2001, the questionnaire traveled to Canada, where it was translated to English and applied to undergraduate students in an introductory course in English Literature in the year of 2000 at the University of Alberta. Drs. Kuiken, Miall & Gifford analyzed 120 responses. Their analytical framework and the categories they described served then as a basis for the analysis of the Brazilian data. The results we present here derive from a comparative study. They show which texts are more frequently read by Brazilian students, the reasons they provide for these preferences and a comparison is drawn with the Canadian results.

II. Participants

The present paper discusses the results of the questionnaires applied to 22 male and 100 female undergraduates from the Faculty of Letters of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. Their ages ranged from 16 to 31 years old. The average age was 20. This sample represents the population of first-year university students of this particular institution.

III. Materials and Method

The questionnaire consisted of 22 items but this paper will only report the results obtained from the analyses of question V with its 3 sections (V [a,b,c]). In this question, students had to provide three favorite types of text and then justify their options by responding to a Likert scale with 18 reasons for reading those types of text. Here is an extract of part of the questionnaire:

Sample of questionnaire

V. Please fill in three different types of texts which you like to read most frequently

(a); (b); (c)

Please answer for each text type why you like reading it.

Va. I like reading (please fill in the text type),
(does not hold true at all = 0, to holds true fully = 5; please answer on the computer score sheet)

1. To gain insight in thoughts and actions of other people	0 1 2 3 4 5
2. To relax	0 1 2 3 4 5
3. Because I can identify with the description	0 1 2 3 4 5
4. Because it is important for my all-round education	0 1 2 3 4 5
5. Because I get help for my personal problems	0 1 2 3 4 5
6. Because I like to be captivated by texts	0 1 2 3 4 5
7. Because the described things could have happened in reality	0 1 2 3 4 5
8. Because I get new ideas and suggestions	0 1 2 3 4 5
9. To entertain myself	0 1 2 3 4 5
10. Because I can deal with problems in my mind without having direct consequences for myself	0 1 2 3 4 5
11. Because I can use my imagination	0 1 2 3 4 5
12. Because I am fond of the style of language [linguistic forms of expression]	0 1 2 3 4 5
13. Because I can get new information	0 1 2 3 4 5
14. Because it adds to my personal development	0 1 2 3 4 5
15. Because this reading has nothing to do with reality	0 1 2 3 4 5
16. Because I want to be able to join in the conversation about this reading	0 1 2 3 4 5

17. Because I am challenged intellectually	0 1 2 3 4 5
18. In order to deal with questions concerning the conception of the world	0 1 2 3 4 5

Vb. I like reading (please fill in the text category),
(does not hold true at all = 0, to holds true fully = 5; please answer on the computer score sheet)

19. To gain insight in thoughts and actions of other people	0 1 2 3 4 5
20. To relax	0 1 2 3 4 5
21. Because I can identify with the description	0 1 2 3 4 5
22. Because it is important for my all-round education	0 1 2 3 4 5
23. Because I get help for my personal problems	0 1 2 3 4 5
24. Because I like to be captivated by texts	0 1 2 3 4 5
25. Because the described things could have happened in reality	0 1 2 3 4 5
26. Because I get new ideas and suggestions	0 1 2 3 4 5
27. To entertain myself	0 1 2 3 4 5
28. Because I can deal with problems in my mind without having direct consequences for myself	0 1 2 3 4 5
29. Because I can use my imagination	0 1 2 3 4 5
30. Because I am fond of the style of language [linguistic forms of expression]	0 1 2 3 4 5
31. Because I can get new information	0 1 2 3 4 5
32. Because it adds to my personal development	0 1 2 3 4 5
33. Because this reading has nothing to do with reality	0 1 2 3 4 5
34. Because I want to be able to join in the conversation about this reading	0 1 2 3 4 5
35. Because I am challenged intellectually	0 1 2 3 4 5
36. In order to deal with questions concerning the conception of the world	0 1 2 3 4 5

Vc. I like reading (please fill in the text type),
(does not hold true at all = 0, to holds true fully = 5; please answer on the computer score sheet)

37. To gain insight in thoughts and actions of other people	0 1 2 3 4 5
38. To relax	0 1 2 3 4 5
39. Because I can identify with the description	0 1 2 3 4 5
40. Because it is important for my all-round education	0 1 2 3 4 5
41. Because I get help for my personal problems	0 1 2 3 4 5
42. Because I like to be captivated by texts	0 1 2 3 4 5
43. Because the described things could have happened in reality	0 1 2 3 4 5
44. Because I get new ideas and suggestions	0 1 2 3 4 5
45. To entertain myself	0 1 2 3 4 5
46. Because I can deal with problems in my mind without having direct consequences for myself	0 1 2 3 4 5
47. Because I can use my imagination	0 1 2 3 4 5
48. Because I am fond of the style of language [linguistic forms of expression]	0 1 2 3 4 5
49. Because I can get new information	0 1 2 3 4 5
50. Because it adds to my personal development	0 1 2 3 4 5
51. Because this reading has nothing to do with reality	0 1 2 3 4 5
52. Because I want to be able to join in the conversation about this reading	0 1 2 3 4 5
53. Because I am challenged intellectually	0 1 2 3 4 5
54. In order to deal with questions concerning the conception of the world	0 1 2 3 4 5

Once collected, the next step was to categorize the types of texts the respondents indicated as the ones they liked to read most frequently. Kuiken, Miall & Gifford arrived at 26. The Brazilian questionnaires yielded 22.

These 22 Brazilian categories were then arranged into smaller groups. Mean ratings of the reasons (q1 – q18) given for reading each category were calculated. The mean of q1 was calculated for all instances of text category the students referred to as *Literary fiction*, for instance. As we were dealing with different variables, we had to decide for an analytical tool capable of dealing with multiple factors at the same time: the multivariate analysis. The cluster analysis (Wards method, Squared Euclidian Distances) was used to identify more inclusive categories of similarly rated texts. Euclidian Distance was chosen to measure the similarity between the variables and Wards method helped identifying the groups. This multivariate method groups variables according to their highest or lowest level of association or correlation. The cluster analysis gives as a result the number of groups and the group which each text category belongs to. This way, it is possible to identify the predominant reason for each reading group. The multivariate techniques give a significant insight concerning multiple dimension phenomena. Although they do not create scientific theories, they provide the subsidies to produce or confirm hypotheses. SPSS for Windows version 10 was used.

In order to find out the hierarchy of preferences, we labelled the reasons as *very strong* (S+), *strong* (S), *neutral* (N), *weak* (W) or *very weak* (W+) depending on how the means rated on the Likert scale (cf. Table 1 below).

Table 1 – Ratings

0.00 – 1.00 ⇒ W+
1.01 – 2.00 ⇒ W
2.01 – 3.00 ⇒ N
3.01 – 4.00 ⇒ S
4.01 – 5.00 ⇒ S+

IV. Results

The categories the students identified in the questionnaires were the following:

1. Literary fiction (includes narrative, epic, classical and literary texts)
2. Novels
3. Short stories (includes chronicles)
4. Drama
5. Poetry
6. Popular fiction (any occurrence of fiction)
7. Romances
8. Mystery/suspense
9. Horror/adventure
10. Comedy/humor
11. History
12. Informative (includes documentary, curiosity)
13. Auto(biography)
14. Social sciences
15. Cultural

16. Psychology
17. Technical/scientific texts
18. Didactic
19. Religious texts
20. Magazine / newspapers
21. Philosophy
22. Others (polemic / “texts that show the humanity of characters” / texts for reflection / every-day life / letters / “social criticism” / ecology)

Once listed, these categories were then subjected to cluster analysis and the result yielded three major groups, as follows:

1. **Fictional:** novels, short stories, drama, romances, mystery / suspense, horror / adventure, comedy / humor, literary fiction, poetry, popular fiction, (auto)biography, cultural.
2. **Informative:** history, informative, magazine / newspaper, scientific texts, didactic.
3. **Reflexive:** social sciences, psychology, religious texts, philosophy, others (polemic / “texts that show the humanity of characters” / texts for reflection / every-day life / letters / “social criticism” / ecology)

Cluster 1 (**Fictional**) has to do with imaginary texts that do not necessarily relate to reality. One category presented a problem, though, maybe due to the limitations of the questionnaire, which does not provide room for the students to define what they mean by each label. As each student indicated three categories (V [a,b,c]), some respondents who mentioned “cultural” as one of their options also chose categories from the *Fictional cluster*, such as novels, poetry and suspense. Therefore, we can understand why “cultural” was assigned to Cluster 1. The student answering Questionnaire 115, for instance, placed comedy and romance together with cultural as preferences.

Cluster 2 (**Informative**) groups scientific, instructional or journalistic texts. Its main characteristic seems to be a direct link with the real world.

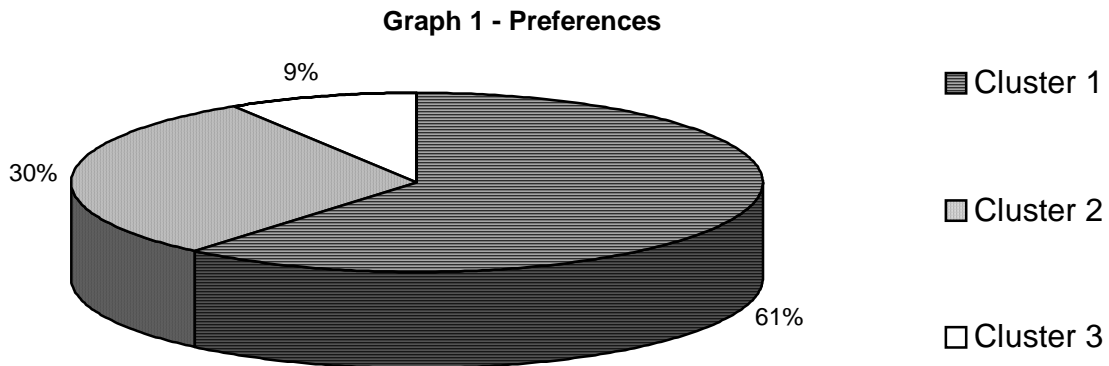
Cluster 3 (**Reflexive**) seems to point towards the individual and the self by means of thought-provoking or polemic texts which question the individual’s reactions to himself / herself and the surrounding world.

Once identified and defined, the three Clusters were subjected to a mean rating and presented the following percentage of preference:

Table 2 - Preferences

Cluster	Options (%)
1	61
2	30
3	9
Total	100

The following graph offers a better picture of Table 2:



As indicated in Table 2 and Graph 1, unsurprisingly, students of literature say they prefer fictional texts, but the high rate of the *Informative Cluster* may be revealing of the educational system. These students seem to rely more on ready-made information than on reflexive texts that would lead them to questioning.

Once calculated the cluster preference, the reasons provided for each yielded the following table:

Table 3 – Ratings of Reasons

Reasons / Cluster	1	2	3
1. To gain insight into thoughts and actions of other people	S+	S	S+
2. To relax	S+	W	S
3. Because I can identify with the description	N	N	S
4. Because it is important for my all-round education	N	S+	S+
5. Because I get help for my personal problems	W	W	S
6. Because I like to be captivated by texts	S	N	S+
7. Because the described facts could have happened in reality	S	S	S
8. Because I can get new ideas and suggestions	S	S	S
9. To entertain myself	S+	N	N
10. Because I can deal with problems in my mind without having direct consequences for myself	N	W	N
11. Because I can use my imagination	S+	W	N
12. Because I am fond of the style of language	S	W	S
13. Because I can get new information	S	S+	S+
14. Because it adds to my personal development	S	S	S+
15. Because this reading has nothing to do with my reality	N	W+	W+
16. Because I want to be able to join in the conversation about this reading	N	W	N
17. Because I am challenged intellectually	N	S	S
18. In order to deal with questions concerning the conception of the world.	S	S	S+

S+ → very strong S → strong N → neutral W → weak W+ → very weak

This table reveals students don't show interest for the linguistic making of informative texts (q12) and they accept these texts as bearers of truth. The fact that in (q15) students don't relate Clusters 2 and 3 to their reality reinforces this picture. It is interesting that (q18) is strong and very strong for the three Clusters, showing that students are interested in issues which concern the world but do not personally get involved. These findings add to previous studies (Zyngier & Shepherd, 2001), which reveal an emotional distance between students and texts. Here we also notice a critical distance. The data reveal that areas such as critical discourse analysis have not made a strong impression on these students. This posture is in line with (q16), where students don't seem to want to engage in further discussion about the texts although they accept being challenged by them (q17). This lack of further engagement is reinforced by the function of Cluster 1, which seems to place literature as a momentary event, one which is entertaining (q9), relaxing (q2), providing insight (q1), but not for helping to develop reflection or a critical posture. This explains the neutral posture for (q4).

V. Discussion

a. On categories

Table 4 compares the categories indicated by respondents in Canada and in Brazil:

Table 4 - Categories compared

CANADA	BRAZIL
1.Literary fiction(includes children's fiction & fairy tales)	1.Literary fiction (includes narrative, epic, classical and literary texts)
2.Novels	2.Novels
3.Short stories	3.Short stories (includes chronicles)
4.Drama	4.Drama
5.Poetry	5.Poetry
6.Popular fiction	6.Popular fiction (any occurrence of fiction)
7.Romances	7.Romances
8.Mystery/detective	8.Mystery/suspense
9.Horror/adventure	9.Horror/adventure
10.Fantasy*	
11.Legal thrillers*	
	10.Comedy/humor*
12.History	11.History
13.Historical fiction*	
	12.Informative (includes documentary, curiosity)*
14.Autobiography/biography	13.Autobiography/biography
15.Historical documentary*	

16.Social sciences	14.Social sciences
17.Social fiction (eg political) *	
18.Social documentary*	
19.Crime*	
	15.Cultural*
	16.Psychological*
20.Technical/scientific texts	17.Technical/scientific texts
21.Science fiction*	
22.Scientific documentary*	
	18.Didactic*
23.Religious texts	19.Religious texts
24.Magazine / newspapers	20.Magazine / newspapers
25.Philosophy	21.Philosophy
26.Others (non-fiction / porn / humor) *	22.Others (polemic / “texts that show the humanity of characters” / texts for reflection / every-day life / letters / “social criticism” / ecology) *

* Differences between the two cultures

One of the first difference between the Brazilian and the Canadian data that draws our attention is that the first category, *literary fiction*, included examples of *narrative*, *epic*, *classical* and *literary texts* in the Brazilian data. Differently from the Canadian readers, our participants did not mention any example of texts which would include *children’s fiction* or *fairy tales*. In spite of the fact that Brazilian Literature for children is a strong market and has been thriving since 1950 (cf. Monteiro Lobato and the televised versions of his books), our students do not prefer this kind of text. This does not necessarily mean they have not had exposure to it but that it is now part of their past and is not recalled at the moment of the inquiry, whereas the Canadian students seem to have it still alive in their memories or they still engage with this kind of reading.

The second interesting difference relates to legal thrillers and crime, which just do not have a tradition in Brazilian literature. This may stem from the higher visibility and profile the judicial and law-enforcement systems place in the Anglo-Saxon world as compared to the Iberic tradition. Also, in a society where violence is always in the headlines, perhaps people do not want to read about *crimes* anymore or do not consider it adequate to a literary treatment. These are hypotheses our study generated which would need further empirical investigation.

As to science fiction, the fact that industrialization emerged in Brazil in the 1940s, and that scientific research is not yet fully established in Brazilian industry up-to-date, being rather confined to elite University circles, it is understandable that science and its achievements are not a consumer item of the popular mind.

The category *short stories* included *chronicles*, a common genre which is a very self-contained and short narrative generally about daily matters and that can be read in magazines or newspapers in Brazil. As chronicles were not mentioned in the Canadian setting, where they obviously occur, we understand that perhaps Brazilian students

considered them as short piece of literature, whereas the Canadians may have understood them as pieces of journalism.

Porn is also a noteworthy difference. It is not mentioned in the Brazilian data. We hypothesize whether the pervasive exposure of sex-tinted material in the media for rather trivial purposes such as beer advertisement and in TV programs for all ages would not have dissipated the erotic appeal that would lead to the production of porn literature.

Fantasy, historical fiction, historical documentary, social fiction, social documentary, scientific documentary, non-fiction were exclusively Canadian categories. Perhaps an investigation of how history is taught in schools and the value and use each culture gives to its museums and related institutions might bring some light on why history and documentary are not preferred by Brazilian students. Maybe the lack of occurrences of *scientific documentary* reinforces the image of a non-technological society, discussed above, once compared with the Canadian. On the other hand, it seems that our society focuses more on the humanities as *informative, cultural, psychological, didactic, polemic, "texts that show the humanity of the characters", texts for reflection, every-day life, letters, social criticism* and *ecology* were exclusively Brazilian categories. The category *humor* had greater occurrence among Brazilians.

We do not intend to claim these comments as final statements. They serve as a rich source for empirical investigation on each topic.

b. On clusters

The second problem we encountered in trying to draw a comparison between Brazilian and Canadian data was the fact that we arrived at different clusters. Instead of 9 we had 3. This indicates that the relations established between texts may be culturally-bound. For instance, Brazilians tended to relate social sciences to more reflexive texts whereas Canadians relate them to informative. The same occurs with *(auto)biography*, which Brazilian associate to imaginary texts rather than historical documents.

VI. Conclusion

As an attempt to answer the question we proposed in the beginning of our study, "Which texts do students prefer to read and what reasons do they present?", we may take our findings as a relevant sample to start understanding first year undergraduate students at particular institution being studied here. They show a significant preference for fictional texts. An important revelation is that although they enjoy reading those types of texts, they show a lack of emotional (Zyngier & Shepherd, 2001) and critical engagement in relation to them. Despite the fact they assume being challenged intellectually, informative and reflexive texts seem to be bearers of truth. Students are interested in issues which concern the world, but they seem to build personal distance in relation to them. They do not want to engage in further discussion. Our results also indicate a strong evidence of the hedonistic function of literature. Literature seems to be an entertaining momentary event which does not contribute to their improvement of reflexive and critical posture. Students seem to rely on and prefer ready-made information rather than questioning it.

Comparing Brazilian and Canadian profiles, there are some differences which may be culturally-bound. Brazilians tend to focus on the humanities whereas Canadians show an interest for technological issues as *legal thrillers* and *historical, social and scientific documentary* are among the exclusively Canadian reading preferences. One interesting finding is that our study points out to differences in relations established within texts.

Social texts, for instance, are considered reflexive among Brazilians, but informative among Canadians. *(Auto)biographies* are imaginary for Brazilians, but have a realistic sense for Canadians as they relate this type of text to *historical fiction*, *magazines*, *newspapers* and *social science texts*, which are informative.

This study demonstrates once more the importance of empirical studies in helping to understand who the students we deal with really are. It reinforces the idea that effective teaching must be based on a better understanding of students' real world rather than on myths and assumptions.

VII. Further studies

It would be interesting to compare not only Brazilian and Canadian profiles but also the German one. Applying this same questionnaire to other national and international contexts might also bring many different results.

Another important investigation would be to find out what causes the emotional and critical distance students have in relation to texts and why they do not understand literature as an important matter for their all-round education.

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