# Teenagers: our future readers

Teenagers are our future and an important group to attract as library users, but finding teenagers who willingly visit their school or public library can prove difficult. In December I submitted my PhD thesis for examination on the topic of teenagers' reading and use of libraries. My main area of investigation was their thoughts on graphic novels, however the discussion ranged across the broad spectrum of reading materials, from books, both fiction and non-fiction, to Wikipedia and social networking sites.

The general consensus among librarians working with teenagers in public and school libraries is that a graphic novel collection and events related to graphic novels are sure ways to persuade teenagers to visit the library. Teenagers' presence can be difficult to achieve, with library use dropping off among children as they reach the teenage years.

> **...teenage participants rarely equated the internet with reading**

I talked to 40 teenagers during focus group sessions with students at Perth metropolitan high schools in late 2006. (Their names have been changed to ensure confidentiality.) Teenagers with a wide selection of reading habits and preferences took part. Although it is a small sample, the findings indicate they have views as diverse as is likely among teenagers in general.

While their level of enjoyment for reading and subsequent reading habits varied, a universal belief was the need to find the "right book," whether it was "interesting", "good", or something they "related to". This extended to finding the right reading material for those who found traditional books abhorrent (strongly expressed by some) and preferred magazines, graphic novels, or the internet. Adam (age 16) described the result of finding the right book, "If I find one I do like then I'll just be there for hours", and Jeremy (age 14) explained what happened when he chose the wrong book, "If I'm not into the book and I'm struggling, I just find I avoid reading."

While teenagers' thoughts on graphic novels informed my initial research questions, this was not highlighted in the information given to students, thus those with a variety of views on and exposure to graphic novels took part. I discovered a greater number of teenagers were avid readers, compared with other studies. Among the 40 teenagers, graphic novels were not found to be universally liked, although for some the format was the perfect material to entice them to choose reading as a pastime. This incongruence with the experience of public and teacher librarians found in the (mainly anecdotal) literature is likely caused by the teenagers I spoke to being drawn from teenagers in general, rather than those who use libraries. The latter could encompass more fans of graphic novels, who would be encountered by librarians.

It is as important to study non-users of libraries as it is to investigate those who frequent libraries. Among my research participants, libraries were not a favoured place to visit. Their school library was a more common destination than a local public library because they were forced to visit during classes held in the library. This implied that given the choice, they would never venture into a library. Even among those who enjoyed reading, their reading matter was often found elsewhere, for example, their home book shelves or bought by their parents. A minority of particularly avid readers, such as Rita (age 15) who said, "I generally like reading if I have nothing to do which is pretty much most of the time, I'm just reading," had discovered libraries were the best source for their voracious reading appetites.

Class visits to the school library were often conducted with the intention of students using library resources to find assignment information. Among participants, the internet or "Googling it," was much preferred to locating a book and reading it to find information. Marika (age 14) considered looking through a book harder than typing a search term and the computer doing the work for her. Marika and others had no concept of the online critical literacy necessary to evaluate the results of a search, but there were students who realised the importance of evaluating online information and balancing it with conventionally published sources.

All teenagers used the internet for entertainment and socialising, although some to a lesser or greater extent, and the majority had computers with internet access at home. While using IM, social networking sites, and other online communication tools involve the literacy skills of reading and writing, teenage participants rarely equated the internet with reading. In fact, reading was almost universally associated with books only. This was highlighted by Leah and Tom (both 14) who proudly declared their hatred of reading and that they never read. Further discussion drew them out to name books they had enjoyed during English classes, their use of the internet, and liking of magazines. In Leah's case she also found pleasure from biographies of people she admired.

My research demonstrates the changing nature of reading, including the different literacies inherent in the more visual materials of the internet and graphic novels. Reading involves more than just traditional books and the future of reading will not necessarily continue the primacy of print on the page and a book held in our hands. Whether reading online, a graphic novel, or traditional book, teenagers are reading and we need to acknowledge and support their reading choices.

I have written a number of articles during my research which include full reference lists. These are available through my research website and blog **http://alia.org.au/~csnow/research/**. I am currently working at Curtin University Library while awaiting the outcome of my thesis examination.

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Currently reading *The hunger games bk 2: Catching the fire*
by Suzanne Collins