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Audiobooks Vs. Reading, Which Offers More?

I have wondered whether you receive the same benefits listening to an audiobook as you do reading a book. For example, do you receive the same logical stimulation or memory retention from what you are listening to? Is better to have the book in front of you reading the story line by line? Are there any added or subtracted benefits from reading the book at the same time the audio book narrator is reading to you? Do you lose any of your creativity when listening to an audio book? I think that reading a book is more intellectually stimulating because even at an early age we can be read to and understand it, but it takes education and practice to become good readers.

I first wanted to get an idea of any benefits audiobooks have. I came across an article from the New York Times called *Wired for Sound*. It was written by John Schwartz who wasn't too familiar with audio books until he had to take a ten hour drive and chose an audiobook as his form of entertainment. He found that the drive felt significantly shorter and gave credit to the audio book. He is now hooked and uses audiobooks as a way to multi task. He is able to listen to a story at a time when he would not be able to read, for example exercising or driving. Although Schwartz enjoys listening to them, he tends not to discuss audiobooks with anyone due to the fear others will think of it as "second rate" reading or that he isn't working as hard by listening to the novel rather than reading a book. He even used the analogy of people seeing his way of absorbing literature as having a waiter cut up his food. His wife is skeptical of the practice and won't settle to listening to an audio book.

The two, Schwartz and his wife, bantered back and forth about a character in one of the books they both had read. Schwartz's wife didn't think that people can absorb a novel of "complex narratives"

through listening, however when this was put to the test, she found out she was wrong. They were discussing a specific character and his role in the book, both remembered his role differently. After using “Amazon’s Search Inside This Book”, a feature that allows one to search the contents of a book, they found that he, the audio book listener, was correct in the portrayal of the character. Listening to the audiobook gave Schwartz an advantage over his wife.

Do the differences Schwartz and his wife have about the way they prefer absorbing pieces of literature affect the way the two learn? In the article Schwartz mentioned that he preferred, and got more out of, lectures in college than he did from the assigned text and his wife preferred the assigned text. I wanted to look more into this so I found a news report that was broadcasted on the Morning Edition of NPR News on 8/29/2011 called, *Think You’re An Auditory Or Visual Learner? Scientists Say It’s Unlikely*.

According to the report, educators have been tailoring lessons to the idea that kids learn in different ways, but researchers have found there is no scientific evidence to back up that approach. Traditionally if you thought that you had a student whom you believed was a visual learner, you would want to introduce information to them visually. Dough Rohrer, a psychologist at Univ. of S. Florida investigated and reviewed studies on learning styles where he found no scientific evidence backing up the idea.

Doug Rhorher said, “We have not found any experimental evidence, that is evidence from a randomized control trial supporting any of these and until such evidence exists we don’t recommend that they be used.” Dan Willingham, from the University of Virginia, said that it is odd to suggest that people’s brains work in fundamentally different ways. We don’t think of someone’s heart working differently than someone else’s. Why shouldn’t it be the case that “the basic cognitive architecture is the same across individuals?”

Willingham also said that it is best to teach students from a variety of ways because they benefit from it. Since variety is a good idea shouldn't we cater to the idea that there might be benefits to reading and listening to books? I wanted to research the use of audiobook in education and came across an article called, *Listening and Literacy: Audiobooks in the Reading Program* included in New Horizon's 1996 publication volume 37, #1. In this article, the authors address educators about how audiobooks will benefit students in classroom. Children derive a wide variety of benefits from listening to good literature. When a child is read to it is their beginning preparation of learning to read independently. Studies have indicated that children who that are read to during their early stages of life make excellent progress in literacy and language development. It's listening to the stories that helps benefit learning basic reading structures such as the setting, characters, understanding the problem, attempting to solve it, and a climatic resolution. It also helps increase vocabulary and allows them to expand beyond the bounds of limitation is the mastery of language. As children listen to these books they begin to understand not only the story's structure but the written language conventions, vocabulary, and aspects of their and others cultures increases. When this happens more difficult stories become easier to read and understanding them leads to higher levels of literacy.

Children benefit from being read to, however, the time dedicated to reading to children declines as the child gets older. Reading aloud tends to be eliminated at school and at home. As children begin to learn to read, teachers and parents set aside less time to read aloud to them. If audio books and being read to has this effect on children then they shouldn't be a bad choice for adults.

In the article published in The New Yorker by John Colapinto called *The Pleasures of Being Read To*, Harold Bloom, a literary critic, expressed doubt about audio books. He says, "Deep reading really demands the inner ear as well as the outer ear. You need the whole cognitive process, that part of you which is open to wisdom. You need the text in front of you." However, Colapinto disagrees and says, "That may be true for serious literary criticism; it's manifestly not true when it comes to experiencing a

book purely for the pleasure of its characters, setting dialogue, drama, and the impulse to know what happens next.” He says that is why people pick up a book in the first place.

Colapinto began listening to audiobooks when he had to interview authors with multiple published works. There wasn't enough time during the day to read so he began using audio books as a way to listen to the material during times where traditional reading was not possible. Since then he has developed a liking to audio books and has even listened to books that he had a hard time picking up. “I'd taken several runs at two late Updike novels, *Seek My Face* and *Terrorist*, and gotten bogged down in both. I have now listened to them as audiobooks and can report that they contain much of Updike's typical brilliance.”

One audiobook he listened to was one that he had already read. He only listened to it to get the voice actors interpretation of it. He failed to understand parts of the book and listening to the actor's performance helped him understand it better and even realize how funny and touching it was.

What makes a good audio book? How does one know they are listening to quality? Mary Burkey discusses what to listen for to know you picked a worthy recording in the article, *Sounds Good to Me: Listening to Audiobooks with a Critical Ear*. The directors of these audiobooks have quite a load on their shoulders as Burkey explains, an award-winning book that was carelessly put together will not draw the same crowds and praise as the book did. On the other hand, a well put together recording can do wonders and put a book on the map that might not have drawn in large crowds to begin with. Burkey mentions that a truly effective audiobook maintains a balance between the content and a flawless production. She explains that the narration is the foundation of the work and the author's voice draws in the listeners through the reading.

According to Burkey, a few things to look for when evaluating a narrator is whether or not the reading feels authentic and is appropriate for the content. This means the voice must match the time period, setting, as well as the genders, ages, and moods of the characters. The narrator should use a

variation of tones when conveying expression, emotion, and energy. The narrator should read the way the text is written, meaning narrative descriptions should be read appropriately. For example if it states, “she exclaimed” the narrator should read the sentence with enthusiasm. Words from other cultures should be pronounced correctly and authentically without stereotype.

As for the recording and production of the audiobook, one of high quality will maintain the same volume and contain clean/crisp sound that also allows for periods of silence. Music can be used in the introduction or to define moods or time changes. Background music and sound effects must not interrupt or distract from the narrator’s flow. Other sounds should not be picked up into the microphone such as the narrator swallowing loudly. There shouldn’t be a noticeable difference in recording sessions or obvious dubbing. The audiobook’s quality must allow it to stand alone with the same value the author intended. Burkey explained, “The mark of an excellent audiobook lies in its ability to remove the wall of performance and draw listeners into the reading with little effort.”

The quality of audio book is important with engaging and establishing a connection with the reader. Just as some books bore people, audiobooks that are not well produced can have the same affect. Audiobooks that are well put together can captivate a whole new audience that wouldn’t have normally picked up the hard copy version of the book due to it being too challenging to read. There are benefits to reading a book as well as listening to one. For most it comes down to personal preference. I haven’t come across any evidence proving one way to be inferior to the other. They both benefit their audiences.

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