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READING AND STUDY SKILLS CENTER AT UM CREATES SUCCESSFUL STUDENTS

By Annette Trinity
Office of University Relations
University of Montana

MISSOULA--

Having worked as a reading specialist in a public school system for 10 years, Rhea Ashmore, director of the Reading and Study Skills Center at the University of Montana, can name one cause of reduced reading effectiveness in school-age children: television. Most students who are poor readers, she said, simply don't practice enough, choosing to settle themselves in front of the TV instead of reading a book.

"While working with seventh graders in a public school, I could tell that a majority of their spare time was spent watching television. When asked to relate to a character in a book, rather than tell about their own personal experiences, the student would describe what happened to a character on television," she said.

By not practicing the art of reading, these students read below their grade level by the time they reach college.

During fall quarter, Ashmore worked with 60 students, half of whom were college freshmen who received below average scores on the Nelson-Denny Test. This standardized test is administered to all freshmen to evaluate their reading placement. The other half of her students last quarter were upperclassmen, learning-disabled and foreign students who wanted to improve their reading skills.

(over)

"Any student can use the center. It services not only remedial students but also graduate level readers who desire to increase their reading rate, comprehension, and/or vocabulary," she said.

While the students are required to attend the center twice a week, they can plan their attendance times in accordance with their class schedules. Once in the center, they work independently with a projector that flashes phrases on a screen at a rate that the student can control. The idea, Ashmore said, is to get the students to read idea phrases rather than word by word.

Next, the student reads the same story in textual form and answers various comprehension and vocabulary questions that rate the students' progress.

The results at the end of the quarter are significant. On the average, a student advances one grade level in reading ability and reads about 100 words per minute faster.

Ashmore acknowledges that a positive reading attitude is essential for good reading comprehension. Her students are successful in improving their reading ability, she says, partly because they are hard-working and sincere.

In response to a growing number of returning students who have been out of school for several years, Ashmore also offers a weekly study skills seminar.

In the future, Ashmore would like to make the reading center more of a learning center which would integrate and emphasize reading, writing and math skills. But for the time being, Ashmore is pleased with the progress her students are making and delighted to be working in a university environment.

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