

Study: Reading literature a good way to stimulate brain

By Corrie Goldman, Stanford University

The inside of an MRI machine might not seem like the best place to cozy up and concentrate on a good novel, but a team of researchers at Stanford are asking readers to do just that.

In an innovative interdisciplinary study, neurobiological experts, radiologists and humanities scholars are working together to explore the relationship between reading, attention and distraction – by reading Jane Austen.

Surprising preliminary results reveal a dramatic and unexpected increase in blood flow to regions of the brain beyond those responsible for “executive function,” areas which would normally be associated with paying close attention to a task, such as reading, said Natalie Phillips, the literary scholar leading the project.

During a series of ongoing experiments, functional magnetic resonance images track blood flow in the brains of subjects as they read excerpts of a Jane Austen novel. Experiment participants are first asked to leisurely skim a passage as they might do in a bookstore, and then to read more closely, as they would while studying for an exam.

Phillips said the global increase in blood flow during close reading suggests that “paying attention to literary texts requires the coordination of multiple complex cognitive functions.” Blood flow also increased during pleasure reading, but in different areas of the brain. Phillips suggested that each style of reading may create distinct patterns in the brain that are “far more complex than just work and play.”

The experiment focuses on literary attention, or more

specifically, the cognitive dynamics of the different kinds of focus we bring to reading. This experiment grew out of Phillips' ongoing research about Enlightenment writers who were concerned about issues of attention span, or what they called "wandering attention."

Phillips, who received her doctorate in English literature at Stanford in 2010, is now an assistant professor of English at Michigan State University. She said one of the primary goals of the research is to investigate the value of studying literature. Beyond producing good writers and thinkers, she is interested in "how this training engages the brain."

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