



News Flash from Guy World: Reading is Back! Brebeuf's Online Reading Forum is Creating More than a Buzz

*By Alex Pope, Vice-principal
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The enticing aroma of freshly baked cinnamon buns wafts through the atrium air and most mornings by 8:10 a.m., the boys are already lining up. But it's not a quick snack from the cafeteria that these students are after.

Believe it or not, it's a book. They are in the atrium lined up outside the library waiting for Ms. Martin to open the doors to let them in.

When did boys start reading again? Hasn't the news from the academic trenches been consistently bleak when it comes to boys and reading? One frequently quoted observation is that by the middle of grade school, boys' reading skills are often lagging two grades behind the girls' and boys say they would rather do anything else than read.

At Brebeuf College in Toronto, thanks in large part to the ingenuity of one staff member, the buying savvy of another,

and a happy father-son professional relationship, that view may soon be turned on its head. At this all-boys high school in the north end of Toronto, it is suddenly cool for guys to be reading. Not only are they reading, they are telling their friends all about it and they are doing this online.

Those early morning readers are enrolled in *Brebeuf Reads!*, an online reading forum that boasts an eclectic group of subscribers. The brainchild of Brebeuf's English department head John A. MacDonald, *Brebeuf Reads!* was created in response to the Ministry of Education's call for action research proposals that would address the literacy development of boys. Accessed through the TCDSB's eClass site, *Brebeuf Reads!* is also a mentorship program in collaboration with teacher candidates at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto (OISE/UT).



MacDonald, a media arts wiz and long time user of eClass, enrolled Brebeuf's entire grade 9 class in the forum in early 2006, along with teacher candidates from OISE/UT.

As MacDonald explains, the idea was born out of a pre-established mentorship relationship between Brebeuf and the University of Toronto that had been nurtured by his own father, John W. MacDonald, professor emeritus at OISE. MacDonald, père and fils had paired their respective students in the past, emailing Brebeuf student writing assignments to be reviewed by teacher candidates. An online forum seemed the next logical step. This has taken boys' enthusiasm about reading a great distance.

The forum contains a discussion board that allows for asynchronous, threaded discussions about a variety of books. Grouped under genre headings, boys are responding to their peers' reading suggestions as well as materials suggested by OISE candidates. At present, 256 participants including students, teachers, teacher candidates and administrators have enrolled in the forum and there have been close to 1500 postings on the discussion board. In the words of MacDonald fils, "the amount of reading discussion has exploded."

In addition, the reading bug has led to other electronic projects. A group of grade 9 student leaders has created a website featuring highlights of student reviews and reading lists gleaned from *Brebeuf Reads!* As well, senior media arts students are producing a DVD documenting the forum's impact.

In some respects, the most exciting part of the project for those most closely associated with it, is the self-generating nature of its successes. The *Brebeuf Reads!* proposal was approved by the Ministry and has been remunerated to the tune of \$20 000 a year over the course of three years. Prior to *Brebeuf Reads!*, the library was a fairly quiet place. Now, boys almost need to take a number at lunchtime. Library circulation has nearly quadrupled since the end of 2005, due in large part to the addition of over 1000 new titles suggested by the boys themselves and acquired through Ministry funds. To date, most of the grant money has gone towards books. MacDonald describes the boys' appetite for the new reading materials as "insatiable", which in turn has created a huge buzz around reading. The silent world of the book worm has become a very vibrant and interactive place. And boys' reading is all the better for it.

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