



SUPPLEMENTAL READING

Students use SparkNotes in addition to the text to enhance understanding

BY MAYA MURTHY AND JOYCE VARMA

Catherine Lockwood | El Estoque

After an evening of homework, senior Henry Yu has a choice: He can either spend an hour reading the assigned 50 pages for his English class, or he can spend five minutes and find a one page summary of the same 50 pages on SparkNotes.

Yu shuts the book and goes online. “I use SparkNotes for every book [assigned in] English class, but I don’t use it for every chapter I get — only when there’s a test or quiz or I don’t really get what the chapter is saying, and I just read SparkNotes for reinforcement,” Yu said. “Or the book’s really long; I don’t want to read that. I’ll use Sparknotes.”

Once the introductory short stories or poetry unit is over, literature classes like American Literature Honors and World Literature start their novels, and students like Yu use SparkNotes — a website that compiles novels, plays and nonfiction into short summaries and corresponding analysis of each chapter — for these assigned readings.

Sophomore Shreya Adloori read the SparkNotes summaries and analysis for “Of Mice and Men” in her freshman year be-

cause she didn’t have time to read the book.

“I didn’t get the specific parts, like details, but I got the overall idea of the chapters,” Adloori said. “With books like ‘Of Mice and Men’ and Shakespeare, the language isn’t very easy to understand, so I didn’t really get anything while reading the book — but when I read the summaries, I could understand a lot more.”

IT’S ONLY EFFECTIVE WHEN YOU READ THE BOOK FIRST AND THEN USE SPARKNOTES TO UNDERSTAND IT A BIT MORE ... NOT IF YOU JUST READ THE ANALYSIS.

sophomore Shreya Adloori

A former student of English teacher Venessa Nava, Adloori said her performance on Nava’s quizzes was poorer when she only used SparkNotes, than on previous assessments where she read the text.

“[SparkNotes] is only effective when you read the book first and then use it to understand it a little bit more, but it’s not if you

just read the analysis by it self,” Adloori said.

According to teachers, services such as SparkNotes offer only basic summaries and analyses. Summaries leave out important details, and the analyses only offer one perspective on the text. Nava uses these limitations when giving assessments, basing them on details not found on SparkNotes to test if her students are truly reading the novel.

“I’ve moved to doing quote or passage response quizzes [where] I provide a passage, and students need to interpret it,” Nava said. “Sometimes I see evidence and actual language from SparkNotes in those responses, and they are typically not the better responses.”

English teacher Stacey Cler has a different perspective that comes from teaching ELD students. She believes that SparkNotes summaries can be valuable supplements to aid understanding of the text. For example, she directs students who are having trouble with Shakespearean language to No Fear Shakespeare, which provides a line by line translation into modern English.

“Sparknotes [offers] me, as a teacher, a way to offer these kids the ability to understand Shakespeare for free that I can’t offer them in the classroom,” Cler said. “My goal is to help someone figure out how best to read. My goal is to motivate someone into reading. My goal isn’t to scare the hell out of somebody for not reading.”

Cler acknowledges that in every class there will be students who don’t read the material, and then do not do well on assessments. She finds ways to help students with the problems that drive them to SparkNotes, often utilizing SparkNotes itself.

“Some of the reasons that you’re having a problem reading is that you don’t get bigger concepts,” Cler said. “If you read something that tells you what to look for, you’re going to pick up on the bigger concepts, and reading is going to be more of a successful experience for you.”

One of the solutions Cler suggests is that struggling students read the chapter summary on Sparknotes, then read the chapter itself, going back to the summary again to verify that the student understands what occurred. She has also suggested using audio books, reading the modern translation for older texts and talking about reading strategies to keep up with and gain a better understanding of the reading material.

However, both Cler and Nava agree that directly taking analysis from SparkNotes is not beneficial to students and takes

away from learning and critical thinking. Nava even considers taking analysis from SparkNotes without proper citation as cheating, and students who are found to be using SparkNotes in their assignments are noted in their records as having been academically dishonest. Last year, Nava estimates that she cited 15 students for academic dishonesty in relation to SparkNotes and similar services.

In contrast, 29 percent of students surveyed suggests that students use the analysis portion of SparkNotes and other similar services as jumping points to form their own theories and ideas about the text. Yu said that he has been successful with taking ideas from SparkNotes and expanding on them afterward.

“If I got the deeper meaning myself without Sparknotes, like I got what the author was trying to say, then I would branch off my opinions [about the text],” Yu said. “Reading Sparknotes will help get your train of thought going.”

Despite the potential drawbacks, including academic dishonesty and lower grades, students continue to use SparkNotes and similar summarizing websites.

Yu said he continues to use SparkNotes without reading the actual text, though he was doing worse in his literature class because of it.

“Sometimes I [don’t] have time to read anything other than SparkNotes, and I feel like I did pretty bad on the quizzes,” Yu said. “I think it’s better to get some understanding than none, though.”

In an informal poll, a majority of teachers said that while they would prefer students to read the assigned pages, given a choice between use SparkNotes or not reading at all, they would have students use SparkNotes in preparation for certain assignments such as class analysis.

Using SparkNotes, students can gain at least a basic understanding of the context of the text, and can still be engaged in class discussions to learn more deeply about the meaning of the text. Having not read anything, a student would be completely cut off from the conversation, having no incoming idea about any kinds of ideas or themes in the text.

When Yu closes SparkNotes he knows that he has finished his reading homework. Whether he has gained everything the book had to offer might be a different story.

m.murthy@elestoque.org | j.varma@elestoque.org

