

Literature's lasting impression

John Gordon investigates what makes shared reading so powerful

The importance of shared reading

Most of us remember reading round the class at school, the format commonly used by teachers in primary and secondary schools to present novels to their students. We may recall that the experience defined our attitude to, say, *Great Expectations* or *Of Mice and Men*. The convention has equal power to shape our attitudes to reading fiction



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more broadly, with influence reaching far beyond school, into adult life. A similar format is adopted for specialised literary study in higher education. And its influence can be traced in the organisation of informal public reading groups. My research explores this convention of shared novel reading in each of these settings, seeking to understand its effect on participants and to identify aspects of the format that contribute to a rich, enjoyable and stimulating encounter with literature for everyone involved.

Through my work leading teacher education at the University of East Anglia, I know that teachers of English who are just starting out can find it challenging to guide successfully this shared reading of novels. Skilled, experienced teachers appear to guide such reading intuitively. Their descriptions of 'just reading in class' are understated, disguising the subtleties involved. There has been little research on the practice, and there are no overarching accounts of it to support new teachers in this complex teaching method. Sophisticated teacherly judgement is needed to balance attention to the novel, students' contributions and teacher talk.

My research comes at a time when influential accounts of literature learning play down the central role of pedagogy – the science of teaching. The concepts of 'cultural literacy' and the 'knowledge curriculum', which have shaped government policy, emphasise *content* – the choice of study texts – rather than how they are presented. My research suggests that students consider their encounter with a novel to be as important as the text itself. If handled well by the teacher it can be transformative, and if not it can be very damaging.

My project 'Literature's Lasting Impression' has investigated this convention of literary reading with a focus on two key questions:

- (1) What features of shared novel reading have positive lasting impact?
- (2) How do teachers in schools and universities improve students' literary response?

The research comprised a survey of adults about memories of reading in school, interviews with students and book group members, interviews with teachers about their methods, and observations of shared novel reading in action. This work can help improve teaching so as to nurture positive and lasting reading for pleasure beyond school. The findings have already been shared with teachers of reading, literacy and English – in primary and secondary schools, as well as in higher education – with a focus on applying the research to have an impact, ideally transformative, on students' learning.

Memories of shared reading at school

In both online and face-to-face surveys, the activity of shared novel reading was recognised by the majority of participants as a feature of their education for

reading and literacy while at school. Adults of all generations reported that they had enjoyed reading literature together in class. Such enjoyment was reported from across the decades since the 1950s, representing periods where organisation of schools, teaching styles and curricula had varied. Shared novel reading was confirmed as an enduring convention of literary study in schools.

Where shared novel reading was enjoyed, it was most commonly experienced through reading aloud. The most enjoyable and memorable reported experience was when teachers read aloud to students, typified in this recollection of reading *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain:

On a regular basis, and I think usually later in the afternoon on a Friday, the head master of our village primary school would read to the whole class. The memory of this still elicits that same warm glow in me all these years later.

The most positive recollections described shared novel reading as a transformative and defining experience, as in this response to reading E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* at A-level:

I felt like a starving man confronted with a banquet. Those English Literature classes were the most memorable experiences of my education.

The quality of characterisation, and scope for students to identify with protagonists, were also factors making for affecting encounters, though again the mediating skill of the teacher is evident in this account of reading Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*:

I felt like the characters in the book were alive. I was able to access a text that I may not have been able to fully appreciate if I'd attempted it by myself. My English teacher introduced me to literature not just books.

Instances where other students read for the rest of the class were far less favourably recalled. Some recollections of shared reading in class described it as uncomfortable. Comments revealed anxiety about reading, exacerbated by the organisational choices made by teachers:

I never liked to read aloud in class but was happy to read along while others read aloud.

The choice of text selected for study could also have a detrimental impact if its potential to engage students was overlooked. For one survey participant, Thomas Hardy's *The Trumpet Major* had little appeal. Introduced at the wrong time, it has ever since coloured his view of the author:

It was a set book for GCE. It has put me off Hardy ever since. It seemed to relate so little to adolescent male (and probably female) interests.

In other examples, readers felt the style or vocabulary of writing inhibited their enjoyment, especially when the choice of text was ill-matched to their age at the time. Some reported returning to texts they disliked at school, only to enthuse about them in adult life.

Additionally, survey and interview participants often distinguished between reading literature for pleasure and reading 'for exams' in school. One student working through a GCSE course remarked:

The problem is we have to do these books for our final exam. There are no books that we can read purely for the enjoyment of it as a class, to like sort of discuss and find out more about, because I'm sure there are plenty of books out there that not many people understand but that have a really good storyline. But we can't do that because of exams.

If we want formal education to cultivate lifelong enjoyment of reading, it may be useful to allocate more time in secondary education to shared novel reading for its own sake, in addition to considering novels solely as the objects of literary study for formal examination.

Teaching and shared novel reading

Literature's Lasting Impression has also identified significant features of skilled teaching around novels that can inform teacher training and development. The second phase of the research entailed observation, recording and transcription of lessons, seminars and meetings. I analysed transcripts using a technique called 'Conversation Analysis', affording close attention to the structure of conversations, to non-verbal features of speech such as intonation and volume, and to how participants appear to understand the contributions of others. This approach is well-suited to examining how students in a class build a shared interpretation of a text, and to scrutinising the nuances of teachers' expository talk, where emphases, pauses and tone are significant resources for engaging students and guiding their response. I also paid close attention to how teachers framed the presentation of episodes in the narrative of the study text, how they gave cues to support students' understanding of events, and how they dramatised the many voices inherent in a novel, belonging either to narrators or characters. This is skilled work informed not only by lesson planning but also by in-the-moment judgement.

Analysis of the transcripts has helped me identify what appears to be a unique form of narration used by teachers of literature. This form of narration has the study text at its heart, even though students only experience the text across lessons and over several lessons – but always



mediated by the teacher's presentation and organisation of reading. I have called this activity 'Pedagogic Literary Narration', to highlight the distinctive purpose of this form of narration – to support students' response to the text according to clear learning objectives. It combines efforts to engage students' attention and support their enjoyment of the text, qualities of reading we hope they may experience when reading for pleasure, but it must additionally support them in analysis of the text according to the disciplinary demands of literary study. The two strands are usually concurrent in classroom reading, even as the narrative unfolds for the first time through shared reading.

The transcripts also confirmed the importance of quotations in literary study, typically where teachers or students quote the novel that they are sharing. In schools, attention to quotations in literary teaching is well established through mnemonics to support how students compose analytic writing. PEA, for instance, reminds them to state a 'point' about the text, provide 'evidence' in the form of a quotation, and then to offer 'analysis' of it, ideally with close attention to specific words within it. The role of quotations in conversations around the study texts has not received the same attention in education research and training material as their use in writing. Yet they appear to be a seminal component of classroom talk around literature, to the extent that a third of one teacher's contributions to discussion over six lessons contained spoken quotations. Recognising how, when and why experienced teachers choose to introduce spoken quotations to their comments can benefit and hasten the development of specialist skills for new teachers of literature. I was able to consider to what extent students keep track of discussion or even recognise spoken quotations. The evidence demonstrated that teachers rarely stated 'this is a quotation', and of course spoken quotations are not signalled by quotations marks. How do

students recognise fragments of text as quotations without these markers, and how do these teaching practices help or hinder their comprehension and their capacity to analyse texts?

Continuing impact of the research

Shared reading of novels can be a transformative experience, as survey participants confirmed, but only if teachers can skilfully orchestrate students' responses in sympathy with the study text, while balancing reading for pleasure with the critical analysis required of literary study as an academic discipline. The concept of Pedagogic Literary Narration and a recognition of the central role of spoken quotations can inform teacher education and training for literary study, to

develop the subtle skills teachers need to guide shared novel reading with success. We may even find parallels in other disciplines where narrative texts are quoted and discussed, for instance in science, geography or history.

One simple but important finding has been to recognise the potential value of distinguishing between reading for pleasure in schools, and reading for critical analysis of literature. In the public survey and in interviews, many enthusiastic and prolific adult readers described how reading 'for exams' in English Literature deterred them from reading for pleasure in their youth. This suggests a case for ensuring students, especially at secondary school, have space to enjoy stories for their own sake. Many survey participants reported enjoying listening to stories without interruption. It is possible that devoting some time in secondary education to this activity may contribute to a lifelong enjoyment of reading. This challenges the tacit assumption that reading in the context of English Literature study inevitably generates such enthusiasm. It seems that for some readers, the literary-analytic orientation to reading may be to the long-term detriment of reading for pleasure. This is not to deny the value of literary reading, but to recognise that readers in the general public, especially those not continuing with literary study in education beyond the age of 16, placed great value in the shared experience of narratives enjoyed for their own sake. Ultimately, a powerful experience of story, not simply the story itself, seems to shape literature's lasting impression. ■

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