Towards the setting up and evaluation of Academic Reading Circles. A critical commentary on academic reading practices in Higher Education Institutions.

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Introduction

When contemplating the nature of University study, it is assumed academic reading will be at the heart of the process. A determining feature of academic research is the ability to make sense of a variety of readings covering every aspect of a topic. Yet, very little time is given to the process of reading within the taught curriculum (JUTLP, 2020). Reading lists are compiled and regularly updated by tutors for students to engage with. However, the purpose of this element of self-study is rarely communicated by staff, understood by students, or scaffolded and supported in the curriculum. Typically reading is not given sufficient attention, leaving students to navigate the process without knowing what is expected of them (JUTLP, 2020).

The purpose of this article is to briefly explore the contested nature of academic reading in the context of an inner-city widening participation (WP) University, making a case for a dedicated reading programme that supports students with their studies. It will consider where such a programme may be of use and examine the context of non-traditional students within a WP university (Lea and Street, 1998). Attention will be paid to student perceptions of their identities and how these may influence their experiences of studying in the context of both WP and our Education For Social Justice Framework (2019 - ESJF). Following on from this discussion, is an appraisal of an existing model for academic reading circles and how this model may be adapted to suit the context of a WP university attempting education for social justice and the closing of the BAME awarding gap.

Context:

I work as an academic mentor, supporting students with their studies. The work of an academic mentor is positioned within the sphere of learning development. This sits outside of the academic content that is provided by the university and is classed as academic support. This role is made possible through the Widening Participation Programme (WPP). With its advent, a corresponding rise in numbers of Non-Traditional Students (NTS) followed; a collective term for first generation students and those from low-income households or marginalised communities, as well as mature students (Wong and Chiu, 2019). In essence, these groups are underrepresented in higher

education (Cotton et al., 2016). Therefore, contextualising the NTS's entry point into HE to understand what they must contend with when engaging with their studies is relevant.

These students are unlikely to have followed the traditional route to HE, their journey is, invariably, characterised by a patchy experience in the statutory education sector of primary and secondary schooling. One that is underscored by successive neoliberal education policies which sought to marketise the education system through the introduction of Academies and Grammar schools and restructure the content of what is taught by "retraditionalising the curriculum" (Reay, 2017, p.12). Such conditions were ripe for the exclusion and disaffection of students as educators struggled to meet the ever changing demands placed on them to achieve measurable and quantifiable results. The outcome was students losing out during their formative years; unable to acquire the requisite skills base needed and thus, entering HE at a disadvantage compared to their more affluent, middle class peers (Wong and Chiu, 2019).

In my practice, this is echoed in the day-to-day dealings with students where concerns for completing assignments can be traced back to the students' relationships with reading. Anecdotally, students have privately expressed difficulties in engaging with academic reading, citing that many of their texts are dense and difficult to decode. Simultaneously, lecturers have raised concerns about the lack of engagement with reading matter and the subsequent effect this has on the quality of assignments submitted for assessment. Additionally, lecturers have raised the prevalence of academic misconduct cases where students' use of reading materials have been deemed to be inappropriate, demonstrating a poor grasp of academic writing conventions, reinforcing a belief that students do not understand them and therefore are unable to recognise academic misconduct in their own writing.   This highlights that frustrations of both students and lecturers, if left unaddressed, could lead to a disenfranchising experience for both parties.   To scrutinise this issue a review of the literature, to comprehend how academic reading is experienced from the student perspective, is necessary.

Engaging with reading: a difficult process for all.

Abegglen et al. (2020) highlight a moral panic around student reading and identify institutional responses which focus on the notion of a deficit skills base and remedial action. This often leads to a solution that is decontextualised and remote from the learning that occurs within the course modules. Arguably, this approach, when coupled with assumptions made by teaching staff that students already have the skills to navigate academic texts, serve to alienate the student (Hermida, 2009). A possible outcome from this assumption is that students are left to deal with the reading load without support and this raises issues about the isolation felt by students and how insecurities they may have about their reading ability are exacerbated (Kimberley and Thursby, 2020). Kimberley and Thursby (2020) evidence these experiences in their study where students displayed defensive behaviours when faced with difficult texts and often retreated to a mode of disengagement. The question arises, why does something as functional as reading create an emotional toll for students?

Emotional toll, shame, and misrecognition

One possible explanation could be that deep-rooted experiences go on to influence and shape responses to any given situation highlighted in the psychosocial dimension of the ESJF. If Bourdieu's assessment that habitus, capital, and field are considered (Grenfell, 2012), the extent to which an individual can interact with any given situation, is determined by their disposition.   In the context of using academic reading as a tool, the individual's educational history will come to bear on their disposition in deploying that tool effectively. Therefore, when students have been deprived, educationally, in their formative years they are left to make up the shortfall at a later point when studying an undergraduate degree. The significance of study at this point takes on a sense of urgency for students which perhaps feeds into ideas of success and self-perception. Students have often remarked that having a good degree is symbolic of achievement. This achievement carries weight as the symbolism is conveyed to their families as well as affirming to themselves that they are capable. Wong and Chiu (2019) reaffirm such positions, noting that students place emphasis on doing well in the first year of their courses as this has an impact on their identity development, even though first year grades do not contribute to the final award. However, the possibility of succeeding in the first year gives students the opportunity to reframe their identities; any negative past experiences with education can be put to rest and students motivated to go further, allowing for a re-evaluation of expectations of themselves (Wong and Chiu, 2019; ESJF). Therefore, the significance of succeeding in the first year of a course cannot be understated. It is destabilising then, when they encounter academic challenges without scaffolds to support them (Hermida, 2009), triggering negative past experiences. Arguably, these experiences formulate an identity of shame (Burke, 2015) that serve to dis-affect the student from the reading process.

The concept of shame is a useful lens to contextualise the experiences of students. Sara Ahmed defines shame as "an intense and painful sensation…felt by and on the body" (Ahmed, 2014. p. 103). This manifests in self-negation, a characteristic taken on by the individual which results in them seeking to conceal their shame from the public by retreating to the self as to be exposed would necessitate further shaming. This has further implications for the public and social spaces that the individual operates within. Coping strategies involve dissociating (Munford and Sanders, 2019) or retreating, thereby skewing the dynamics of public spaces. Consequently, the physicality of shame impacts the spaces where people interact (Ahmed, 2014) and the potential for misrecognition arises, as shame can be mirrored in feelings of disgust by others towards the individual. The impact of this leads to pathologised identities (Burke, 2017), whereby the student is bound by their own shame and the misrecognition that forms from the skewed interactions with others. Significantly, the pathologising is cultivated by locating the problem with the individual (Burke, 2017). This state is exacerbated when seen in relation to subjective ideas about the nature of pedagogic participation, whereby the student is expected to undergo a transformation (Burke, 2017) tied to ideas of capability, motivation, and resilience (Ahmed, 2014). To achieve this transformation, students are positioned as having to acculturate to a system (Lea and Street, 1998). Failure to do so, would place them outside of the system and further distance them socially, cognitively, and emotionally from HE experiences.

The concept of shame and misrecognition offers an explanation of students' dispositions when addressing academic literacies. However, there is a balance to be struck between explaining a phenomenon and further pathologising students with a 'deficit' narrative. If we accept that students

use their learning to help them reframe their identities as well as a means to improve their outcomes, providing learning experiences that address students' needs on a holistic level is vital to engender meaningful change that does not compromise student agency (viz ESJF). Arguably, confidence in academic reading plays a central role in mobilising this change and assessing how this is facilitated would be beneficial.

Effective reading: synthesising "efferent" and aesthetic forms to develop a deeper understanding of the text.

To comprehend what might be considered as effective reading, it is useful to consider the work of Rosenblatt's (1988) concept of aesthetic reading. Rosenblatt (1988) posits language as a device that is shaped by the individual's experience of "verbal, personal and social contexts" (Rosenblatt, 1988. P.3). Therefore, language does not solely operate on public, shared meanings but is open to nuance provided by the private experiences of the individual. This is significant in the context of reading as the individual draws on their existing knowledge and experience to identify, select, filter, organise, and synthesise information to establish meaning and develop thinking. This approach is defined as an aesthetic one and is placed in contrast to an "efferent" form (Rosenblatt, 1988, p.5) focussed on extracting the essential details of the text to establish a meaning that "results from an abstracting-out and analytic structuring of the ideas, information, directions, conclusions to be retained, used or acted on after the reading event" (Rosenblatt, 1988. p.5). From the reader's perspective, anyone can present an efferent form of meaning but the aesthetic stance can only be determined by the reader themselves and thereby, nuance in meaning is created (Rosenblatt, 1988). Nevertheless, the two elements are essential to nurture an iterative, immersive action to reading. Maguire et al. (2020) demonstrate this in their study where the participants' approaches to academic reading are shaped by drawing on their identities whilst recognising that their identities are also shaped by the academic and professional discourse of their disciplines. Therefore, given that the parameters for effective reading are located between the "efferent" and the aesthetic, how can these be re-framed into a workable practice for HEIs?

Establishing a theoretical framework to support reading practices.

To embed purposeful reading practices within and across the curriculum, it is worth articulating the theoretical framework for such a practice to exist. Utilising Bakhtin's concepts of dialogism and carnival (Holquist and Emerson,1981) as a catalyst for synthesising contemporary pedagogical ideas, provides a vehicle for action. In operationalising the concept of supercomplexity (Barnett, 2000) with social constructivist ideas of communities of practice (Wenger, 2021) and the collective third space (Gutierrez, 2018), a practical framework to mirror emancipatory pedagogical ideas can be forged; one that positions reciprocity between the institution, the teacher, and the learner.

In Barnett's (2000) concept of supercomplexity, known outcomes are suspended in favour of the unknown; actively nurturing a critical, exploratory stance (Barnett, 2000, p.420). This has the potential to redefine learning and teaching at policy level, whilst offering a framework for the institution to evaluate and redefine its identity and ethos.

The notion of uncertainty that underpins supercomplexity echoes Bakhtin's rejection of any form of strict formalisation (Holquist and Emerson,1981). In its place, Bakhtin develops a distinctive concept of language rooted in a sense of opposition and struggle. Dialogism, therefore, embraces forces that determine the way language is experienced, along with those that position language within a context (Holquist and Emerson,1981). The juxtaposition and sensitivity between the two forces demonstrate "a plurality of experience" - heteroglossia (Holquist and Emerson,1981, p.20). This is positioned as an invitation for discourse, a negotiation of ideas to be explored rather than monologic means that centre around absolutes and known truths (Jamali Nesari, 2015).

Bakhtin's notion of the carnival, a suspension of authority and status where the locus of power is removed from the teacher, also has implications for the way a reading project can be facilitated; offering a practice orientated space where the iterative process of negotiating between contexts and the interplay of voices give rise to meaning (Shirkhani et al., 2015). This has parallels to Lave and Wenger's concept of community of practice (Wenger, 2021) where the development of a shared repertoire and social capital are cultivated. Add to this, the overlap of Gutierrez's collective third space (2018), where the language of recognition is given weight; learners' starting points and histories are used as the baseline for exploring knowledge together.   Thus, in positioning dialogism alongside supercomplexity within a third space to form a community of practice, the conditions are set to facilitate Rosenblatt's (1988) form of effective reading.

However, implications for this course of action involve HEIs being clear about intentions and not exchanging knowledge outcomes benefitting all in society, for individualised ones based on preparing students solely for employment outcomes (Williams, 2016). Hence, learning cannot solely focus on the ability to transmit knowledge but must reflect knowledge making (English, 2015). In practical terms, the use of genres simplified as templates should be guarded against (English, 2015) as to do so, would nurture a purely instrumental approach to learning. This poses a critical question around the use of intervention programmes such as the one proposed in this paper. One that problematises rather than accepts students' starting points and offers solutions to "fix" learning deficiencies in preparing students for employment opportunities, rather than to enrich learning experiences. Cognisance of this dilemma must be at the forefront of any planned intervention. It involves some understanding of where these interventions should be carried out; embedded as part of the taught curriculum or added as an extracurricular activity? Thus far, academic reading is expected to be carried out as a 'liminal space' activity where learners grapple with threshold concepts (Cowley-Haselden, 2020). This frames academic reading as an extracurricular activity, carried out in isolation. Furthermore, for HEIs to integrate reading practices within the curriculum, there are implications for timetabling and content taught; embedding academic literacies is viewed as compromising knowledge gained from content. However, there is a growing sense that academic reading as part of academic literacies can no longer be considered subordinate to the content forming part of study and efforts to conceptualise how this might be done, are called for (Rhead and Little, 2020).

Nguyen and Henderson (2020) offer a holistic approach to the reading process that argues for a "dynamic reading practice" (Nguyen and Henderson, 2020), encompassing three strands: Instrumental; critical; and aesthetic. The combination of these strands facilitate extraction, analysis and meaning of texts. This allows for an informed position when reading and evaluating multiple perspectives, and corresponds to Rosenblatt's concept of efferent and aesthetic reading

(Rosenblatt, 1988). The Aesthetic facilitates reading through the lens of experience and thus generates meaning, deep understanding, and creative responses to the subject matter (Nguyen and Henderson, 2020). In reality, students often default to the instrumental approach alone and in doing so, create a tension: Students build habits around extracting what they need for the purposes of their assignment but are then in danger of missing the tone, detail, analysis and complexity of the text. It is in this context, that Seburn's (2016) model for academic reading circles is examined as an applied offering for embedding reading practices within this post '92 HEI.

Embedding reading practices in HE: a practical focus.

Seburn (2016) recognises work must be done with the contextualisation of texts. It is not enough for students to decipher the meaning of text alone. Seburn contends the difficult part for students was to connect the readings to "course lectures, previous knowledge, and current events; with assumed cultural context that authors use to drive key points" (Seburn, 2016, p.11). Additionally, students must be aware of the technical features such as distinguishing the main points from supporting ones. Hence, the development of Academic Reading Circles (ARCs) which focus on cultivating the skill for "intensive, deep comprehension" (Seburn, 2016, p.11).

The structure of an ARC's course relies on three component areas; common text shared with the whole group; defined roles taken up (in rotation) by each member; and discussion time spent on the readings. A key facet is that participants assume a specific reading role each week. Seburn (2016) identifies five roles for readers to undertake: leader, contextualiser, visualiser, connector, and highlighter. In doing so, the reader has a different lens to consider the reading material. This makes explicit the layers incorporated in the reading process which can often be missed when adopting a purely instrumental approach. The discussion time facilitates the analytical exploration of the text as well as allowing for the synthesis of ideas that stem from different perspectives readers assume. In practice, it is the discussion element that affords students a continuum to traverse and explore learning, as well as consolidating reading as a social practice in developing knowledge (Cowley-Haselden, 2020).

Key factors to consider when incorporating a reading intervention programme are time constraints, resources, and availability and commitment of participants. In the absence of allocated curriculum time, if the programme operates on a volunteer basis during extra-curricular time, this can be problematic as there is no guarantee of reaching students who would benefit from the programme (Warren, 2002). Additionally, the emphasis will be on students giving their time when they are already time poor. Conversely, to embed a programme within the taught curriculum would have implications for the way content is delivered thus necessitating a further discussion on how to apportion and balance instructional based formats with learner centred approaches.

Conclusion

This paper set out to examine the contested nature of academic reading and the place of reading interventions deployed in the context of a post '92 WP university and ESJ. It considered several factors that impact how reading for academic purposes is conducted from an institutional point of view as well as from the student perspective. It also sought to articulate a pedagogical framework for reading as a social practice to build deep knowledge bases.

A significant factor was the recognition of students' starting points and how their motivations for study were shaped by their histories and a need to reframe their identities through the process of education. A challenge to this exercise is the implicit set of assumptions that are attributed to students by the institution; forcing students to acculturate to a system without the scaffolds in place to support them. Reading academic texts is an area of study that is under-supported and this risks exposure of weaknesses, for students, that studying can bring about, rendering them vulnerable. This gives way to an emotional toll for students in the form of shame and misrecognition. Therefore, the case for the provision of a reading intervention is compelling. Yet, concerns about how this provision is couched has been subject to debate. Should HEIs view the issue as a skills gap to plug or should there be a more considered approach that fosters deep learning? Whilst there may be other motivating factors that steer HEIs towards the first option, there is a clear pedagogical argument to assume the latter. In adopting supercomplexity, HEIs can position themselves to respond reflexively to ever changing demands, whilst retaining a pedagogic integrity that allows learning to flourish. Bakhtin's dialogism and the carnival underpins and draws together the concepts of communities of practice and the collective third space providing the necessary conditions for an academic reading circle that promotes deep and sustained learning within an equitable platform. Seburn's ARC model appears to offer an applied solution and it will be of interest to evaluate how this model addresses academic reading in the context of the pedagogic thread outlined in this paper. The implications for wider practice offers an opportunity for collegial and collaborative work, between all parties, that synthesises theory and praxis in an intelligent and sustainable form.

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