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Title:

Reading in English Classrooms: A developing culture of disenchantment

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Abstract

Based on a three year project conducted in Australian secondary schools, this paper captures a developing disenchantment with reading in and for subject English. As part of an extended professional learning experience for teachers, students and their English teachers were interviewed and students were asked to draw reading. Paying attention to the sensitivities both students and teachers express about classroom reading experiences and to the impact institutional culture has on what they do and feel, this paper identifies a developing culture of disenchantment that is veiled by recurring busy and technically-oriented activity. We suggest that in a pervading culture of valuing what we measure (Biesta, 2017) students regard reading at school as ‘work’, find it difficult to keep their minds on task, and experience a loss of independence in thinking. Teachers, loath to take risks in a culture of compliance, also describe their disenchantment with current practices.

Keywords: reading, English, disenchantment, technically-oriented, imagination, student voice

Introduction

Reading texts in secondary English classrooms is not simple work. It is often a challenging experience for students who need to engage with texts and simultaneously do what their English teachers, schools and external curriculum authorities require. It is commonly understood that reading is a process where the ‘whole subjectivity of the reader is implicated’ (Yandell, 2006, p. 319). In Lesser’s (2014) exploration of why she reads, she argues that reading is both a journey into other worlds as well as an exploration of self: ‘Nothing takes you out of yourself the way a good book does, but at the same time nothing makes you more aware of yourself as a solitary creature, possessing your own particular tastes, memories, associations, beliefs’ (p. 6). Engaged reading is an enlivening process that involves reflective and metacognitive thinking that is intriguingly different for each person. We argue elsewhere that reading is an imaginative act (McGraw & Mason, 2017) yet because institutional contexts are important mediators of students’ reading (Learned, 2016), we seek to examine in this paper how classroom contexts and dominant pedagogical practices impact on what students do and feel when they read. We find, in line with Biesta’s (2017) argument, that in classrooms focused largely on measurement, what is lost is the freedom and independence of the student (p. 317) and the teacher, and that what should be valued as meaningful reading experience is often forsaken. A turn toward outputs and results and a shift away from process and experience is leading to serious levels of disenchantment. As one early career teacher interviewed for this project who has since left the profession, commented: ‘We are not educators, we are just workers ... caught up in a lot of stuff that really doesn’t matter.’

In many ways, the process of reading and our experience of it is intangible, varied, and confounding. When we ask secondary school students to explain the experience of reading, they have to search and reflect and when they do begin to describe it, their words are often tentative. Most students in this study had not contemplated the actual experience of reading in detail or with any seriousness using it merely to enunciate questions about the text. They seemed unaware that the reading they do at school can differ in focus from the reading they do at home. While it can be argued that insight into the reading experience is irrelevant and that what we say about texts matters most; we argue in this paper that explorations leading to deep understandings about the personal, social, cultural and institutional experience of reading in English do matter for both students and English teachers. When we teach reading without an inquiry into the intellectual, emotional and embodied experience that reading is for individuals in classrooms, we flatten the experience into passive absorption of what systems require. We run the risk of not giving students the metacognitive tools to enhance their reading experience and miss a vital opportunity to critically examine and improve what we do as teachers based on students’ feedback.

Our aim in this paper is to capture secondary students’ experiences of reading in English classrooms, what is essentially complicated, dynamic and secret (Meek, Armstrong, Austerfield, Graham and Plackett, 1983) and much more than a technical and strategic exercise. In our effort to capture a complex picture, we also examine their teachers’ reflections on teaching reading in English. The paper is based upon our involvement in a three year reading project conducted in secondary schools which has since expanded to another three years. Funded by the Victorian Department of Education and Training and led

by the Victorian Association for the Teaching of English (VATE), the project in the first three years, involved teams of English teachers in over 20 government, Catholic and independent schools working in communities of practice, each with a critical friend, to examine English students' experiences of reading. Based on what was revealed in student focus groups and through an examination of students' drawings of reading, teachers developed a topic for a practitioner inquiry and trialled and evaluated alternative approaches for teaching reading in their classrooms. Toward the end of each year, students were invited to share their new insights into reading and to provide reflections and feedback based on what they had experienced in classrooms. This paper draws upon interviews conducted with over 300 students prior to teachers commencing their practitioner inquiries and on interviews conducted with teachers toward the end of their practitioner inquiries. Worrying trends of indifference, avoidance and disempowerment were present in the students' stories and we saw similar feelings of disenchantment in teachers' descriptions of their practices prior to conducting their inquiries. Reading in classrooms is bound by complex contextual factors like cultural and social routines, an individual's emotional responses and habits of mind, as well as pedagogical, curriculum and assessment choices. We find that in a culture largely fuelled by a focus on assessment, reading in classrooms is dangerously framed as 'work' and learners who are increasingly isolated and immobilised (Reid, 1984, p. 12) are disengaging.

The Study: Contexts and Data Collection

In the first year of the project four teams of English teachers from four secondary schools took part, in the second year six teams of English teachers from six schools were involved, and in the third year ten teams of English teachers from ten schools participated. The schools included rural, regional and metropolitan state, Catholic and independent schools. Each team included three to six teachers who teach English at junior, middle and senior secondary levels. In Australia, students are mostly 13 years of age in Year 7, which is the first year of secondary school, and 18 years of age when they complete the final year of secondary school in Year 12. We, the authors of the paper, worked as critical friends with the teacher teams in communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) focused on attending closely to students' learning and building shared knowledge through practitioner inquiries into the teaching of reading.

Each year the teams framed their inquiries by examining the thoughts and experiences of students. Permission was sought from students, parents and principals to invite students to participate in open-ended focus group discussions about their reading experiences. Students were also invited to draw their experience of reading. The students were selected by their teachers to ensure that a range of students with different abilities and attitudes to reading were involved in the discussions. Interviews with 18 volunteer teachers from 11 schools were also conducted at the end of each year and these were transcribed. All interviews were open-ended, extended discussions based on prompt questions. During the discussions with students, field notes were taken by researchers that included direct comments made by students. The researchers took care to capture the students' exact wording; however, such a process involves a degree of selection and interpretation that cannot be avoided. Clearly, not everything that was said was recorded; however, the researchers attempted to honour the students' voices through close listening, attentiveness, empathy and curiosity. In this sense

the interviewers worked intuitively, drawing upon their interest in reading and their interest in students' experience to record what was 'interesting and important' (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995, p. 11) to young people and to English educators. Field notes of this kind are inscriptions and 'such inscriptions inevitably reduce the welter and confusion of the social world to written words that can be reviewed, studied and thought about time and time again' (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995, p. 8). Students' names were not recorded by the interviewers.

Field notes from the student interviews and the students' drawings in each school were examined by the critical friends and key themes, patterns and questions were reported back to each school in written reports. The reports written for each school and the transcribed interviews with teachers form the basis of data for this paper. Ethics approval was gained by a university ethics committee and permission was obtained from the Victorian Department of Education and Training as well as from the schools to use the reports for research purposes and to interview volunteer teachers.

Capturing the experience of reading

It's interesting because we don't read anything in the same way. It depends on the person's reality. (Year 11 student)

Reading is understood as dynamic socially and culturally constructed experience that is 'continually on the move' (Iser, 1972, p. 285). As readers make meaning from texts in situated contexts, they draw powerfully upon memories, skills, feelings, views, values, dispositions, prior knowledge and developing understandings about how language and particular texts work. Reading, as Reid (2011) suggests, is itinerant. When we read Reid (2011) writes, 'we traverse a text, and meaning arises from our movement through the intricate sequence of words, a movement that is both spatial and temporal' (p. 16). As readers engage in imaginative journeys through, across and between texts they embody and envision possibilities based on their own interpretive assumptions.

Many students interviewed during this project understand that story and the process of reading is fundamental to our lives – and that engaged reading equates to intense experience. 'When you're reading you're creating who you are', said one Year 10 student. 'I can really get lost in a book. And I find myself,' said a Year 7 student. A Year 8 student commented: 'When you're into a book, you can be overcome with emotion'. A Year 10 student declared: 'I'm a logical person. I figure out pathways. I'm always guessing. One of the best parts of reading is the guessing.' Many students recall with pleasure and intrigue the processes of visualising, problem solving, waiting and reflecting. 'Books I like take a while to get into. I can be confused and trying to work things out but it keeps me thinking and trying to make sense,' said a Year 8 student.

Insert Figure 1

The student who created the drawing above seems to understand that reading is an opening of possible worlds reliant on thinking, feeling and connecting. It is a relational experience where connections are made either figuratively or in reality with 'friends'. There is a sense of

wonder and curiosity in this drawing that is central to engagement in reading and also a strange and paradoxical sense of travelling and being at home.

While most students have positive reading experiences in their lives, a key theme in their stories was that attitudes and behaviours related to reading change according to context. When comparing reading in primary school to secondary school, most students suggested that reading in primary school was more socially oriented and, in comparison with secondary school, they had more opportunities to select their own texts. 'You weren't forced to read things in primary school. You were free,' recalls a Year 8 student. Many students also fondly recalled intimate family reading experiences when they were younger suggesting that reading was often associated with a sense of security, calmness at the end of a day, and belonging. 'I really enjoyed reading with Mum in bed. It was special,' commented another Year 8 student. Many junior secondary school students said they preferred to read at home compared to school. Reading at home is comfortable because students are able to physically extend their bodies and relax. They feel calm in this context because the spaces are quiet and they are more likely to feel engaged because they have selected their own texts. Alternatively, reading at school for many young people is difficult because of distractions, not being interested in selected texts, and feeling physical discomfort. Most students interviewed, including students of all ages and abilities, said they found reading at school to often be boring. Rather than the dynamic, imaginative experience that comes with engagement many students suggested that reading in English was often a passive experience. 'When we read in class I pretend to read. Sometimes I feel restless. Sometimes I feel tired. Reading in class makes you feel tired,' said a Year 7 student.

In English classrooms reading is powerfully influenced by the reading practices that are authorised and transmitted in the social institution of the school (Luke and Baker, 1991). The shaping of curriculum, the framing of success criteria, the choice of texts, the construction of activities, the nature of assessment tasks, the design of rubrics, the focus of feedback, the use of time and space all create an ecology in the classroom that favours and reinforces certain approaches, silently embeds expectations, and moulds over time, habits of mind. We turn now to three interconnecting themes present in the student interviews in all participating schools: the construction of reading as work, a culture of mind wandering that is linked to disengagement, and the loss of voice and freedom students experience as they ensure that required tasks are completed in preferred ways. A developing sense of disenchantment evident in what the students say is supported by a clear theme in the teachers' reflections where they describe their dominant teaching practices prior to engaging in this project as recurring busy and technically-oriented activity.

The construction of reading as work

Yandell (2012) argues that in England at least, reading has been reduced to a version that is reductive and technical-rationalist (p. 283). For most students interviewed during this project, reading at school is laborious 'work' associated with formal and narrowly structured written responses, assessment and testing. 'Work' implies a dreary surrender to convention. Teachers, driven by more rigidly designed curriculum, scaffold activities to nudge students in certain directions, usually toward meeting specified learning intentions and assessment criteria. In contrast to primary school where students say they had more freedom to choose their own texts, texts in secondary school English are mainly selected by teachers and

authorised, standard views about texts and how to respond, dominate. Students suggest their interpretations of texts are limited by formulaic essay writing structures and rituals. Many students spoke about feeling inadequate in classrooms and unable to value, share and develop personal interpretations. In classroom contexts where there are preordained structures within which to respond, repetitive rituals for reading texts, and constrained views about how to be successful, students feel disempowered and many lose faith in the validity of their own personal ideas and abilities.

If you're doing it [reading] in the classroom no one really cares because it's work. You feel like you're judged for your opinion. You feel odd. It feels like there's only one answer. You feel like you're alone in your opinion. (Year 8 student)

When you have to answer questions students get confused because they don't know what the teacher wants. What the teacher wants dominates. There's always different ways you'd like to tackle things, we always go the teacher's way. (Year 10 student)

I felt so dumb in English because I didn't know what to say about the book we were reading because I couldn't connect to it. I couldn't write. I felt stupid. But I know I'm not. That's really frustrating. (Year 10 student)

We don't talk about how you read. We talk about what we're reading. The questions aren't very deep. We don't often talk about our personal opinions. We focus on characters and how they behave. (Year 7 student)

When students find little value in school reading experiences, they resort to pragmatic solutions to meet requirements. We found a worrying number of students from all year levels who admitted to not reading the texts set by English teachers; even students in the final years of schooling suggested they did not need to read entire set texts. Rather than develop first-hand experiences of texts, students use sites on the internet, teacher prepared notes, and study guides (which are sometimes included on schools' book lists) in order to satisfactorily respond to teacher questions.

Insert Figure 2

This disturbing trend, rather than pointing to a lack of reading skills, suggests a powerful stance taken by young people who exercise their free will and decide not to learn (Kohl, 1994). 'I was forced to read and so I don't. I got detention for not reading and punished. When it's a chore you don't want to do it,' said a student in Year 10.

Manual (2012) argues that there is a correlation between students' engagement and pleasure in reading and their level of achievement in reading assessments (p.14). Drawing upon a range of reports and interpretations, including Mendelovits et al. (2009), which examined Australian students' PISA reading results in the year 2000, Manual suggests that students' reading practices and their attitudes to reading 'shape their capacity to master higher-order reading skills of synthesis, informed critique, interpretation, evaluation, reflection and

meaning-making' (p. 17). She concludes by arguing that the pedagogical choices teachers make are 'powerful and lasting' (p.33) and that a commitment to the holistic learning of our students is required.

The interviews with teachers also reveal a worrying trend toward more structured and repetitive written tasks linked to reading and to a form of stunted teaching where teachers slip into covering the curriculum rather than teaching and creating (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006, p. 283). When reflecting on teaching practices, one teacher commented:

It really highlighted to me what a boring approach to exploring texts we had you know. It's all those pressures. We have to teach the text types in a structured, explicit way and then there is only so many hours in the week and so what gets moved out is the space and time to let students just enjoy reading, to write whatever they want, to have some fun, god forbid. Those kinds of things seem to get nudged out first.

Another teacher from a different school said:

You just think, 'Oh no, I'll go the fast route' or 'I need to do this to get to the assessment tasks and that's all I'm worried about' ... I realized I was probably just as responsible for the decline in reading that I was blaming everyone else for. You slip into writing the chapter summaries and writing chapter questions and thinking that this is going to get the student to read and it doesn't – all they do is look for the answer to the questions.

An early career teacher in a third school spoke about the frustration of entering a school where students answered questions on texts in pre-prepared booklets:

We have lots of booklets, they are very big on creating these booklets that you give to the kids and they are all question and answer type stuff. My first year there, two years ago, I went "I can't do that", it was boring for me so I can only imagine how it felt for the students but as a first year teacher at a new school I was kind of like "Ok, cool, we'll go with this".... I find that there is just too many texts and too much content to get through and we are always aiming for mid-year and end-of-year exams.

The interviews reveal a concerning pattern of teachers also regarding their teaching as 'work'. Kane (2004) suggests that a culture that defines itself through a focus on work is by nature ordered, rational, administrative and most often repressive and authoritarian (p. 64). Biesta (2010) suggests that the notion of 'work' is related to instrumentality and necessity, of completing tasks that have clear aims and endpoints (p. 82). In a pedagogy focused on work and production, plurality, voice and freedom of expression are weakened. Young people, who are more attuned to play and are increasingly empowered in their daily lives through heightened levels of independence, decision-making and responsibility, rightfully label activities devoid of pleasure, authenticity and possibility as 'boring'.

Mind wandering

You're reading the words but not really thinking about it. (Year 9 student)

Insert Figure 3

As suggested by the two students above, moving in and out of texts in English classrooms is a common experience. Sometimes this sort of mind wandering occurs for students who lack a repertoire of reading strategies and the skills required for comprehending selected texts. Sometimes the reader is unable to relate their prior knowledge to the selected text and they experience confusion. Sometimes there is a lack of purpose in students' reading. Sometimes relational factors that exist in classrooms distract students or make them uncomfortable and stressed. Sometimes students have other things that are more pressing on their minds that interrupt fluidity. Sometimes students simply dislike the texts they are asked to read. Whatever the reason, mind wandering seems to be a regular experience which interrupts the flow and development of reading.

My mind wanders when it's difficult. (Year 7 student)

My mind wanders when I'm tired. You don't notice when your mind is wandering. All of a sudden you realise. (Year 10 student)

It's like my brain goes wandering off. Reading is hard work. (Year 7 student)

When you're engaged you understand and wonder. When you're not engaged your mind wanders. This happens for me most of the time in English. (Year 8 student)

I get distracted. My mind wanders. It happens a lot in books. I can read the words on the page but I just flick through and my mind's not there. (Year 9 student)

If you're not interested, you think about other things. You get distracted. You turn the pages and you don't comprehend a thing. (Year 11 student)

Last year the teacher read the whole book in class. I took very little in. I can't see it. Some people preferred it because it was easier. My mind wandered. (Year 10 student)

For these students wandering away from the text often happens unknowingly when meaningful connections are not occurring. It is an absent wandering and the text is largely abandoned. Students find themselves staring blankly at a page that transforms into a backdrop for imagining something else and they decode without comprehension. Students who regularly move in and out of texts in these ways have patchy understandings. They pick up basic information about setting, characters and events but lack a cohesive sense of the whole and are unable to recognise the layers and complexity in texts. Many students have accepted that wandering away from the text and not returning to it is a regular part of their experience in the classroom. Because they still manage to complete assessment tasks, many do not seem to be concerned that their minds are increasingly elsewhere.

Disempowerment

It's not as fun because we can't develop our own point of view. When we do chapter questions it gets annoying. When we read aloud in class the voices aren't right. I have vivid voices in my head and its monotone in class. (Year 10 student)

Reading is enhanced through dialogic experience. Through the experience of voices interacting, both internally and externally, readers engage in the dynamic process of making meaning and forming interpretations. In the interviews students talk about the way voices and questions in their minds enable engaged comprehension and this occurs for them mostly in the books they read outside of the classroom. 'I talk about it in my head to myself,' said one Year 8 student. Engaged, fluent reading is imaginative and expressive. It is fuelled by tentative questions and an enduring search for what is possible. 'When I question a book I like it because it means I'm invested in it. It makes me want to read more,' said a Year 9 student. An interjecting, timely, personal voice enables wondering, curiosity, and helps to build and reinforce opinions and perspectives as well as critical thinking and metacognition. As suggested by Taylor (2011), little is known about these silent dialogical processes and their contribution to meaning making. Taylor's (2011) research suggests that internal conversations play an integral role in reading transactions and that the dialogic nature of the process has interpersonal and intrapersonal dimensions (p. 159). For most students in our study, interpersonal, social opportunities for meaning making related to reading are the most valuable. Through inclusive, well-facilitated classroom dialogue about texts, through role-plays and embodied experiences, and through metacognitive thinking, students are able to voice developing thoughts, formulate personal interpretations, imaginatively enter situations and evaluate alternative views. Engaged reading is empowering because it is fuelled by the personal and cultural imagination. In classrooms where certain views and approaches are privileged and expected, students lose interest and worryingly, begin to distrust their own thoughts. The interviews and student drawings worryingly draw attention to a lack of confidence and to feelings of incompetence and disempowerment. 'When you're stressed, you can't think well,' said a Year 10 student.

Insert Figure 4

The drawing above completed by another Year 10 student in a different school indicates a concerning attitude to reading: a sense of feeling disabled at the prospect of engaging in increasingly more difficult or disengaging classroom reading tasks. In the teacher interviews, this student's English teacher spoke about the importance of hearing his students' thoughts about their reading experiences. From examining the students' drawings in particular, he learned that the students at his school 'are disengaged and we need to do something about it.' What also struck him was the 'sheer profundity of what they [the students] were producing.' The drawing above had a particular impact on him: 'I'm not sure I'll ever forget it,' he said. Here was an 'incredibly quiet student' who the teacher considered to be 'weak' and yet the drawing indicated that the student was capable of complex metaphorical and creative thinking that hadn't yet been tapped in the context of the English classroom. The teacher became

aware that he and his colleagues had become used to ‘looking at students in deficiency sort of ways, thinking about what they are missing and what we have to give them’ The drawing was a turning point for the teacher and his team who decided to focus on student voice and dialogic reading for the purpose of their inquiry.

The value of listening to students’ diverse voices and to what they express about their experiences of reading is a key theme in the teacher interviews. Messages coming from the students, sometimes forcefully expressed like the words below, inspired teacher teams to critically reflect on their practices, experiment with different and more imaginative approaches, and find renewed energy for teaching reading.

Students should have a voice. Push the students to have their own say. Don’t just teach your personal views. We need more freedom to explore. Freedom in relation to ideas. Talk about the text and big picture ideas and then talk about structure later. Sometimes they talk about structure first and then you’re looking for the arguments as you read. It ruins your thinking. (Year 12 student)

Conclusion

I think I’ve already made my mind up about books. It’s like a mindset that can’t be changed. I could probably have changed my mind in year 8 or 9 if the books were better and I’d had better experiences. (Year 11 student)

Investigations into students’ personal and cultural experiences of reading in English do matter for both students and English teachers. Interviews with students in Victorian secondary schools in Australia reveal a concerning disenchantment with reading in English. While most students appreciate and understand the dynamic, imaginative experience of reading, many of those interviewed regarded reading at school as ‘work’ and found it difficult to keep their minds focused on the process of reading texts for classroom purposes. A trend of disempowerment was also evident in the interviews where students relied heavily on their teacher’s interpretations of texts rather than on their own developing thoughts. Both students and their teachers express a disenchantment with recurring busy and technically-oriented activity and yearn for space to engage in socially mediated, imaginative, deeply meaningful experiences which build higher order reading skills. As a consequence of listening closely to the sensitivities that both students and their teachers express, we question, in line with Biesta (2017) whether what we choose to measure equates to good reading practice and argue that moves toward aligning pedagogy and assessment processes with rich understandings about the nature of reading are what is required. Turning away from the wondrous experience that reading is, will no doubt lead to growing levels of disenchantment and to a stagnation of students’ performances in high stakes reading tasks.

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Biographical notes on the contributors

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Dr Amanda McGraw is a Senior Lecturer who coordinates the Master of Teaching (Secondary) program at Federation University Australia. The program is known for its innovative school partnership practices and is taught on-site in a cluster of diverse regional and rural schools. Her research interests include reading in English, dispositions for teaching and teachers' professional learning. Amanda was awarded an Australian Government Higher Education Citation for Outstanding Contribution to Student Learning. She taught for nearly 20 years in both state and independent schools and held a number of leadership positions in schools including Deputy Principal.

Mary Mason

Mary Mason is a teaching and learning consultant. She was a leader of curriculum, learning and research at Methodist Ladies College, Kew, Wesley College, and Geelong College. Whilst there, she led innovative programs developing student understanding of and taking agency for their own learning. She is a past Vice President of the Victorian Association for the Teaching of English (VATE) and presently leads the Professional Learning and Research Committee of VATE. She is the author of many books for English teachers and has consulted in a number of schools on curriculum. She has worked for the past four years in the Reading Community of Practice at VATE.

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4