Why *that* question? Reimagining classroom reading activities from the basis of what we understand about engaged reading

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ABSTRACT

The authors offer a series of strategies around re-engagement of students in reading, framed by the findings from a 6-year project. Listening carefully to what younger readers themselves say about reading, they interrogate ways that a number of school practices work against the pleasure of immersing readers in books. The second part of this edition's Practical Strategies suggests reading approaches for teachers to revitalise practices dulled by testing and the structures of everyday school demands.

When a question is asked by a teacher I always think, why that question?
A thoughtful Year 8 student sat with a small group of peers trying to capture the complexity of what happens in her head when she reads at school. She explained her frustration at having her thinking tightly framed, at having to dismiss her own developing ideas and focus on what someone else required. *We always go the teacher's way*, she said. She had never articulated these thoughts. They were silent, hidden responses that had not seen the light of day.

As teacher/researchers, we have a special interest in how students' learn and think. When, a few years ago, each of us stepped into educational roles focused on cultural change in schools (Amanda moved from schools into teacher education and research; Mary moved into school leadership; and David became a literacy coach with a cluster of schools), we each saw the power of listening attentively to students. In different contexts, each of us came to understand that while what teachers did mattered, the sense that students made mattered most. Questions about student learning and the nature of reading led Amanda and Mary to develop the VATE (Victorian Association for the Teaching of English) Reading Community of Practice nearly 6 years ago and David joined us three years into the project. Deep questions about reading, particularly in secondary school English, are still at the heart of our work and while this project has led to many interesting insights, we continue to be challenged by perplexing questions related to the nature of reading and how it can be effectively taught.

The VATE Community of Practice is a yearlong professional learning project funded by the Victorian Department of Education and Training and managed by VATE. Teams of English teachers apply to participate in the project and they are supported to closely examine their teaching of reading through the allocation of Critical Friends. The three authors of this paper are Critical Friends who work within the project on behalf of VATE. We have now worked closely with around 30 diverse schools and have talked to hundreds of young people about reading. In this paper we want to share some of what we have learned over 6 years and, based on what teachers have been doing in their classrooms, suggest approaches for engaging young people, more authentically, in reading.

What do students say about their reading experiences at school?

It is interesting to see a re-emerging interest, in relation to educational policy, on student voice and a formal acknowledgement that students should be 'empowered to take ownership of their learning, to make purposeful contributions to their learning environments, and to tackle issues arising in the world around them' (Victorian Department of Education and Training, 2018). Gathering students' thoughts about their reading experiences is the first critical step in the VATE project. We do this in a number of ways. With permission from schools, parents/carers and students, we conduct focus group discussions with groups of students from all year levels in secondary schools. In these discussions, we talk about reading experiences at home and in English classrooms. We also ask students to talk about the process of reading and what happens in their heads and bodies when they read at school. As another strategy for delving into and examining reading experiences, we invite students to draw what happens in their heads when they read. A third approach is that we invite students to think aloud what is happening in their heads as they try to comprehend and analyse extracts of texts. We have also taken field notes while small groups of students unpack what they do as they collaboratively try to make sense of selected texts. In this context we have examined the impact of social processes on meaning-making.

Based on discussions with students and on their drawings, we write a report for the teachers highlighting key themes. This then becomes the starting point for teachers to develop a focus for a professional inquiry. With the support of Critical Friends and with a continuing focus on paying close attention to what students do and say, teachers trial and evaluate different teaching and learning approaches.

> *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.*

He loomed large this boy and focused on his fingernails as he talked. He tried to describe the experience of mind wandering, something he did automatically whenever he encountered a page of print. *I'm reading but I'm thinking about something else. It doesn't sink in,* he said. And he lets his mind wander not knowing how to change things.

Amanda and Mary have written in other contexts about how students describe the nature of engaged reading (McGraw & Mason, 2017); a process we refer to as an imaginative act. Based on interviews with students and teachers, we have also written about a developing culture of disenchantment related to reading in secondary school English (McGraw & Mason, 2019). We have been surprised by the consistency of messages that emerge in the conversations with students. In rural, regional and urban secondary schools and in state, independent and Catholic schools, the stories students tell and the perspectives they share are remarkably similar. In relation to what we want to explore in this paper, two key themes emerge across all school contexts:

- Teaching and learning activities related to reading seem limited in diversity and the same sorts of reading responses are repeated across year levels. While students are encouraged to discuss texts in small and whole group discussions and students in most schools have opportunities to construct creative responses to texts, there appears to be mainly a focus on students responding in writing to short answer and essay questions, generally after they have completed chapter summaries. Essay responses to texts, which are required in many schools from Year 7, are expected to follow regimented structural formulas (set out in formats like TEEL: Topic Sentence, Explain, Evidence and Linking Sentence).
- Students have little understanding of the process of reading and what to do to foster capacity and growth. Few think metacognitively about their reading and, while highly competent readers have these skills, they suggest that this sort of thinking has been

developed over time and largely independently. Students suggest that in English the focus is on the text rather than on the process of reading and how to develop as readers.

Because most students suggest that the types of reading activities in English are limited and because they have fuzzy understandings about how effective reading happens, an alarming number of students resort to shallow practices that become part of their reading response routine. They regurgitate what they think their teacher requires. Many play the game of pretending to read whole texts and focus only on what is labelled as significant. They use language borrowed from others in class, on the internet and in study guides. They focus on getting the structure of writing 'right' and not on using writing to develop and refine ideas. They lose sight of authentic purposes for reading and see classroom reading as a means to achieve certain results in assessment tasks. They see metalanguage as terminology reserved for writing and find it difficult to transfer their understandings about how language works, to speech and conversation.

I can only read books I'm interested in. I can't read it if I'm not interested.
She talks about the importance of choice and the other students nod in agreement. *If it's challenging and interesting I'm in; if it's too simple, I'll be bored and pretend.* She knows herself well. She would like to share her ideas with her English teacher. She has many. She is confident and full of potential.

We are interested to find that many students love to read. Outside of school. When we saw this trend emerging in the student interviews, we (and the students' English teachers) asked students to split a blank page in two and draw their reading experiences inside and outside of school. Through the drawings and subsequent interviews, we have found that the experience of reading for young people at home is positive because they select their own texts. Reading at home is often a bonding experience with other family members and friends. Reading at home is also done in a private, pleasurable space that is relaxing, safe and free from distraction. Reading enables many young people to escape the responsibilities and problems associated with everyday living. We have been surprised to hear many teenagers talk about reading as a copying strategy for anxiety and stress.

I don't mind reading, it's relaxing. It calms me down if I get angry. It makes me calm.
It takes me somewhere else.
He is in Year 7 and already the stresses associated with secondary school and the demands of teachers and parents are overwhelming. He is quietly spoken and fragile.

When students read at home they engage seamlessly in reading processes they rarely talk explicitly about at school. They are motivated to read through active prediction and connection-making, puzzle solving, questioning, reflection and visualisation. Many want the experience of reading at school to be pleasurable. They crave dramatic tension and want to see relevant connections to their own worlds and relationships. Many fail to realise that the demands of reading at secondary school are more challenging and potentially different.

I can really get lost in a book. And I find myself. I relate and I find out about myself.
She disappears into an imagined world. *You lose contact with everyone around you and it's like a virtual reality. But you're in control*, she says. The experience is visual and dialogical and she talks about seeing fine detail, colour and hearing voices. It's a sensory, embodied experience and for her and *some characters are better than real friends.*

At school and in secondary English, reading involves increasingly sophisticated expectations. In

English, readers are required to understand how language works to create different effects. They are required to explore sub-texts, symbolism and ambiguities and to move beyond the plot to examine the unfolding of allusions and deeper concepts. They are required to compare and contrast texts and notice subtleties in language, purpose, values and technique. They need to develop and justify personal viewpoints with conviction and also be open to reinventing or refining their interpretations as they engage in ongoing internal and external dialogue. Texts are not just technical representations of something one-dimensional and obvious. They are understood contextually and even young people appreciate that our responses to them are individualised. Eagleston (2019) suggests 'literature is living conversation' (p. 6). Something dynamic. Creativity, he suggests, exists not only in the construction of the text but also in the mind of the reader (p. 9). If reading, as we also suggest, is an imaginative act, then the teaching of reading at these more sophisticated levels must also involve the imagination of the teacher.

Teaching reading in English

> *We don't talk about reading, we just do it. It's so weird, I just don't think about it.*
> *We never talk about it – and it's really hard to find the words.*

They are not quite sure how to answer the question 'what do you do when you read?' Why that question? Is it even relevant? But they know within that there are various feelings, vibrant reactions and automatic approaches that swing into action when they choose to read and are asked to read. They know it as a mysterious process that could even help them to delve into their own humanity. They are curious. All of them.

We tend to focus on particular texts in English rather than on the act of reading, why we should become better at it, and why certain texts are worth examining. Students, particularly those who are reluctant readers, largely share the functional view that we learn to read so that we can find employment. Other students suggest that they are required to read texts in English because their teachers want them to examine cultural issues like racism, conflict, diversity and growth. While some think that a focus on issues and themes enables open-mindedness and empathy, others, who see the same themes emerging year after year, are more cynical.

> *Texts are selected by English teachers because of the issues they raise. They are selected because they're easy to teach. They are curriculum fillers. And the issues are shoved down your throat.*

He sat with arms folded. Confident. Critical. Perhaps not recognised as a school leader but definitely with a reputation as a thinker. Sometimes too smart for his own good. *They build the curriculum based on the issues. It's so forced. It doesn't mean that you take it in because it's so forced.*

The idea that reading activities are leading to prescribed and preferred responses has led the teachers involved in the VATE Reading Project to reconsider their choice of activities as well as their assessment methods and base these more closely on what we know about the imaginative act of reading. Investigations with teachers and ongoing revisits to theory (e.g. Rosenblatt, 1938, 1978; Iser, 1972; Gee, 1996) and research linked to teenagers and reading (e.g. Atwell, 2007; Thomson, 1987) have led us to compiling a bank of classroom reading activities and strategies that teachers have found to be highly effective in building students' interpretive thinking. We include some of those activities here in the attached table (see Appendix 1). The activities engage students purposefully in processes linked to engaged and critical reading: they foster connection-making, dialogic interactions, embodied involvement, visualisation and metacognitive thinking. But on their own, the activities (like any learning activity) do not necessarily lead to deeper levels of understanding about texts

and the process of reading. In the midst of these activities, the teacher must be an active presence prompting, modelling, reflecting, emphasising, demonstrating, explaining; engaging purposefully in a spontaneous, well-timed dance (Gee, 2015) where the student also has the capacity to lead (Boomer, 1988).

The activities are rich contexts for formative assessment where what is learned about the students' developing capacity to read is used to inform and improve pedagogical decisions. In actively making thinking and sense making visible, they provide teachers with better understandings of students' reading skills as they move from decoding to exploration, analysis and to forming worthy perspectives about texts.

Conclusion

We wonder about the impact of NAPLAN and high stakes testing on the culture of reading in classrooms. We wonder why teaching has become a technically oriented enterprise and why reading, in all its fascinating guises, is largely regarded by students as 'work'. While we find, by listening attentively to students, that there are significant issues related to engagement in reading at school, we also find that teachers are eager to examine their practices and try alternative approaches. They too often feel disenchanted and some feel caught in positions where they lack agency. What often gets in the way of change is the cultural and educational context of the school: inflexible timetables, busy and rigid curriculum and assessment schedules, lack of meeting time for teachers, embedded routines related to student behaviour, expectations from school leadership.

You read because you have to. You don't think about it, you just look forward to finishing it. If we could choose, I'd remember things and get interested in thinking about it. Let us take control. Take away the whole question thing. Questions and answers ruins it. When you talk about your own thoughts, it helps you to understand it more.

He is pragmatic about schooling and knows what he needs to do in order to achieve mediocre results. He checks his phone during our conversation; he has the air of someone well connected, on the pulse. An entrepreneur. Problem solver. Fifteen.

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