



Academic reading: fear and trembling or being and belonging?

Jane Saville, Tasha Cooper and Stephen Hunt

University of the West of England

Abstract

At the University of the West of England (UWE) Bristol, part of our focus on reading skills has involved embedding collaborative reading techniques within subjects to improve confidence in tackling texts, promote reading as a social practice, and boost belonging within disciplines and cohorts. Our poster presentation reviews the literature on student emotions towards reading, and how these influence their practices. We use this visual representation when liaising with academic colleagues to co-create and facilitate collaborative reading activities.

Considerations of student 'affect' foreground the motivational dimensions of the reading experience; we look at both pre-existing psychological and emotional barriers to engagement, and incentives and enablers that encourage confident reading and enjoyment of academic texts. We consider how the research literature supports and informs our practical reading workshops. We hope activities such as reading circles and text-mapping relieve the individual from sole accountability for comprehension, bringing reading 'out from the dark'. Deconstructing the process of reading through roles contributes towards the co-construction of understanding and knowledge, activating fresh insights.

Discussion of reading through this shared approach potentially helps to develop student confidence, to nurture feelings of belonging, and to enhance cohort identity. However, we recognise that higher education comprises a diverse body of students, with a wealth of differences in cognitive abilities, backgrounds, and cultural experiences. Through this literature review, it is intended that learning from work already published will contribute towards evolving best practice in channelling agency and easing anxiety in academic reading for all students.

Keywords: academic reading circles; belonging; emotions; collaborative learning.

Community response

The innovative approach to promoting and developing reading skills at UWE Bristol gives the learning development (LD) community an opportunity to reflect on best practice and innovations around teaching reading. The extensive literature review covered by the poster brings to the fore the emotional barriers to reading. These are both positive, including confidence and self-perception, and negative, often causing anxiety about reading, such as fear of failure and running out of time. The emotional dimension and individual learning history are vital considerations. Participants drew connections with other discussions at the conference relating to the practitioner worries that can arise when working with students on an emotional level, including the fear of overstepping professional boundaries, or 'playing therapist' to anxious students. The collaborative approach suggested by this presentation was embraced as a helpful and welcome alternative strategy, working collectively to foster appropriate peer-to-peer support.

Community members appreciated how thoughtfully the poster lays out the literature demonstrating that students' struggles with reading cannot be resolved with a study-skills 'sticking-plaster' approach, i.e. telling students 'Here's a technique - get on with it!' The learning context is much more complex. For instance, the research highlights that social justice is often overlooked in literature relating to reading. However, acknowledging barriers in reading sessions can open up discussion with students on their reading practices, often revealing how their lived experiences of inequity can impact their learning.

Next steps and additional questions

The project at UWE Bristol provides an opportunity to reflect on what can often be an overlooked or occluded area of learning development. The following questions arose from the community:

- Do some students even realise they have negative emotions associated with reading?
- Where are the boundaries when dealing with emotional barriers to learning?

- How can we seek to empower students to learn more effectively when they are subject to a myriad of social and economic challenges that can negatively impact their learning?

Authors' reflection

'Playing the therapist' is obviously unrealistic, risky and inappropriate in the classroom context. Facilitators of learning are not trained to take on this role, and this is not what we are suggesting. Our experiences with facilitating collaborative reading techniques have shown that asking students to consider their emotional response to reading can open a conversation which normalises these difficulties and helps students to feel less isolated. Whether this conversation takes place publicly in the setting of the classroom, or privately in the students' minds, it is still potentially liberating or transformative, and often leads to a willingness and confidence to tackle academic reading through a supported approach. The peer-to-peer nature of collaborative reading techniques allows students to co-construct meaning and formulate their responses without losing face. Making these connections in the supported classroom context can also help to contribute to a feeling of belonging.

It does appear that some students do not realise that they have negative emotions associated with reading, and some openly declare this! Some students are visibly relieved to have these emotions acknowledged and talk about them freely; others appear to have a 'penny drop' moment. We also talk about neurodivergence, and how this affords both barriers and advantages when reading. It may be one of the first times that a facilitator of learning in higher education has advertised the positive aspects of neurodivergence, and the effect on students is tangible. They appear to be more enabled. This is borne out by student feedback taken during sessions over the course of our two-year project.

Given that so much of studying in higher education involves reading, it is important to enable students to progress their learning, empowered with this key skill. We do, of course, need to be alert to students who may be wrestling with mental health issues and dealing with traumatic situations, but this is normal practice in any facilitated learning context. Reflecting in advance on the choice of subject matter for a collaborative reading activity is important, in addition to managing emotion in the classroom and how we might appropriately signpost to further help.

Conclusion

Students are subject to a myriad of social and economic challenges that can negatively impact their learning, but it is not the responsibility of the learning developer to address all those challenges. However, this should not be a reason for inaction. We can be a small part of the solution. On that day, in your classroom, those students can be empowered to read more confidently, more accurately, and expand their knowledge by hearing the perspectives of their peers and articulating their own understanding.

Further reading

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to all the contributors who shared their reflections and enriched our insight into this conference presentation, and its impact on the audience. The authors did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

Author details

Jane Saville is the academic development manager at UWE. She is a Senior Fellow of Advance HE and her interests include assessment and feedback literacy, teacher education, and leadership within the third space of HE.

Tasha Cooper is a library learning developer for the College of Health, Science and Society at UWE Bristol. She is a Fellow of Advance HE, and her special interests include digital literacy, digital reading and adopting new learning technologies.

Stephen Hunt is the library learning developer for the College of Business and Law at UWE Bristol. Within this role he coordinates academic skills; English language teaching; and learning materials for university-wide and embedded, subject-specific purposes.

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