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Christine Jarvis

University of Huddersfield,UK

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Researching Adult Learners' Reading Histories and Practices

Christine Jarvis
University of Huddersfield, UK

Abstract: *This paper presents the results of an empirical study which explored the reading histories and practices of mature women students on a UK Access to Higher Education course. Such courses provide an alternative route to Higher Education for adults who left school without achieving University entry qualifications. The paper considers a relatively neglected aspect of research in adult education – research into students' reading practices. It argues that such research can enable us to support more effectively adult returners whose approaches to texts may be dramatically different from those of individuals who have experienced a conventional education.*

Purpose of the Study

Reading is central to study in Higher Education; all teachers are to some extent teachers of reading. Yet teachers' understanding of their adult students' reading histories, reading practices and beliefs about reading is usually limited. Reading is an hermeneutic rather than a technical act – an interpretive and intertextual process, shaped by the reader's expectations and experiences and by the social contexts in which it takes place. These expectations and experiences significantly affect how students read the texts we as teachers present to them. The more we understand about how, what and why our adult students read, the more effectively we can work with them to enable them to engage with different kinds of reading, to become confident, critical readers. This research sought therefore, to discover what reading meant to two groups of adult students and to link this understanding with their approach to their learning and the texts they encountered and debated during their course of study.

Research Design

Thirty-six students from diverse cultural backgrounds, ranging in age from 21 to 57, participated in this study. All were women as the course in question was designed specifically for women returners. The gendered nature of the sample was taken into account in the research design and analysis both of which recognised that reading practices can be shaped by gender as well as by other factors. The fieldwork took place over a two year period in order

to enable work with a different group of students each year. I interviewed the women in depth at the beginning of their courses using a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, in order to understand their reading and other cultural practices (cinema and TV viewing, in particular). These interviews asked students to recount childhood memories of reading, to indicate who had influenced their reading at different stages in their lives and to describe what kinds of reading (if any) they undertook currently. I then spent three hours a week for a year with each group of women observing class sessions in which they studied a range of popular and literary texts and concluded the research via unstructured interviews exploring changes resulting from the period of study. Students kept learning journals, also available as research data, in which they reflected upon their classroom studies, their reading and any connections they made between the course and their lives. An element of triangulation was provided by using the observation notes of class teachers. The data were open coded and grouped into categories prior to analysis using an interpretive approach drawing on textual and literary criticism.

The students' accounts were shaped by their histories, perceptions and beliefs and sometimes also by popular myths and narratives. By the time I had analysed and coded them and written them up as a research paper they had become doubly textual – my story about their stories. The research cannot therefore present participants' experiences in some essential and uninterpreted sense. It does, however,

offer highly situated interpretations which make it possible to consider the complexity and intertextuality of the reading process. As Usher et al have noted, the generation of knowledge from this kind of research “is concerned not with generalisation, prediction and control but with interpretation, meaning and illumination” (Usher, Bryant & Johnson, 1997, p. 181). For these reasons, the paper offers contextualised accounts of women’s reading histories and practices rather than a more abstract and generalised summary of the findings.

Reading Theory and Adult Learning

A consideration of intertextuality and of reception theory can help to illuminate our understanding of the adult student’s relationships with reading. Theories of intertextuality insist that texts are not self-contained systems. They incorporate other texts – those the writer has read and those the reader has read. Such theories may concern themselves with a text’s relationship with other written texts; they may also define texts more widely, suggesting that, “at the very least – the ‘textual’ and the ‘extra-textual’ inhabit each other, or that – more radically – the ‘extra-textual’ is another kind of text” (Worton & Still, 1990, p.33). Reception theory takes up a range of positions from the extreme subjectivity of Holland’s argument (1968, 1986), that reading is primarily a recreation of the reader’s own identity, to those which admit the rhetorical and affective properties of texts. Iser (1978) distinguishes between the artistic text, that created by the author, and the aesthetic text, its realisation by the reader. He draws attention to the fact that texts are never complete in themselves but consist of pauses, spaces and gaps which require completion by the reader who must make connections and bring aspects of her/his own experience to the act of reading. For Iser a literary text is a “gestalt” (1978, p.279) produced by the reader’s active striving to make something coherent from the words on the page. Fish (1980) introduces the importance of context, which always restricts the possibilities for reading without absolutely determining them. He identifies the existence of shared, but not monolithic or stable rules for interpretation and this allows for the influence of history and culture in shaping interpretation.

McCormick (1994) creates a useful synthesis of reading theory which gives due weight to the text as a structure but also acknowledges the role of the reader. She argues that meaning is made between the general and literary repertoires of the text and the general and literary repertoires of the reader. The literary repertoire of the text consists of factors such as form, plot and characterisation; its structural and rhetorical properties in effect. Its general repertoire is composed of the morals, ideas, values and beliefs to which it refers and which help to construct it. The text’s repertoires are not static, but shift in relation to the reading context. Readers also have repertoires and are “inhabitants of particular socio-cultural formations, with particular *literary* and *general ideologies*, who appropriate from their society, both consciously and unconsciously, their own particular *repertoires*” (McCormick, 1994, p. 71). These theoretical frameworks suggest, therefore, that students’ relationships with reading will be shaped by their cultural, social and personal experiences, inseparable from their sense of subjectivity and social belonging.

The constructivist approach taken by reception critics and by explorations of intertextuality is compatible with Freire’s (1972, 1997) writings on liberatory education. Reception criticism insists that reading is a creative process. Freire promotes a pedagogy which encourages learners to create their own worlds rather than to receive them ready made. This is precisely what happens when students are encouraged to recognise their active roles as readers, rather than to absorb a static and idealised text supposedly representing the author’s consciousness. Moreover, Freire sees people’s engagement with popular culture as “an integral part of the culture of resistance” (1997, p.106) and emphases on the active reader are particularly significant when thinking about popular culture, so often presented as a powerful, brainwashing phenomenon. Freire’s ideas about the use of “generative themes” in education lend themselves readily to a reflexive, intertextual engagement with popular texts. If teachers and students can identify the “generative themes” which permeate students’ lives, then these can be studied through the concrete examples of cultural products. Those explorations can be used to develop a critical and creative consciousness. Simi-

larly, it is possible to connect adult education work on transformative learning with intertextual approaches to textual study. Once the reflexive nature of the reading process is accepted, the potential of literature as a transformative educational medium is clarified. It has the capacity to introduce the reader to “disorienting dilemmas” (Mezirow, 1981, p.7) in the form of concrete literary examples. These dilemmas are understood intertextually, are interpreted reflexively in terms of the students’ own life experiences and consequently the exploration has the potential to challenge existing meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 1991) and promote transformation.

Families Like Mine

Women talked about using books to find out more about the world, to learn and understand more. Although this *sometimes* involved exploring wider social and historical issues, it almost *always* involved reading to explore issues and situations pertinent to their own lives. They tried to understand better those cultural and social factors which shaped their own family and domestic situations. They looked for heroines facing difficulties like their own. Women used their reading to explore a wide range of issues including race, gender, class, violence, anorexia, body-image and sexual pleasure. I want to illustrate this process by focusing on one of these – class and the family. I consider two aspects of this – how women used their reading to explore class and the family and the impact of their own class and family situations on their attitudes to reading.

One of the main reasons women gave for disliking some types of popular romance was that these were out of touch with the financial realities of their everyday lives. In spite of the commonplace assumption that popular fiction is escapist, these women were fairly clear that they liked it to have a strong realist dimension. Brigid, a married woman in her thirties, who felt she had become middle class over the years, explained that she felt her relationships had been made and strengthened through difficulties; the everyday realities of raising a family, coping with illnesses and crises and making the money go round. She preferred authors, like Cookson, Binchy, and Marion-Fraser who enabled her to identify with families struggling against oppression and poverty: “I see a lot of family life, especially

Maeve Binchy’s books, things that you can relate to, everyday things [...] It was probably people’s love for each other that helped them through hard times.” Very few women chose “escapism” as their reason for reading and were much more likely to say that they read “in order to learn more about people and the world.” They spoke about their reading in terms which suggested that they saw it as something which taught them about their own social and political histories, for example:

I think a lot of the historical romance and family sagas I do read I like to read sort of novels based around the um, sort of Hitler regime in the second world war, um, not always sort of factual. I mean a lot of it is based on factual evidence. Basically, because I think it’s things that children should be aware of nowadays. (Brigid, interview)

Cos I’m very interested in actually when they come from, um, really sort of background working-class and things and they work themselves up, like the coal miners and things like that [...] those are the ones that I always go for, that they pull themselves out of the ... like the working class that lift themselves and get on with it sort of thing. That’s the type that I’d look for (Becky, late twenties, cohabiting, no children).

Fowler (1991, p. 175) talks about the Cookson’s romances as “the dream book of the family” for those “enmeshed within the confines of kinships and still dependent economically on men” and something of this comes through in these interviews. Women often chose stories featuring hardship in small communities and families, focusing on romance and relationships as they struggle against their situations. They used their reading to consider the family as a restrictive regime, confining women in a class-based patriarchal system, but also as a protective institution, supporting its members against the oppressive middle and upper classes and the exploration of these contradictions could be very productive. The family was seen, too, as the place for deep feelings and group solidarity. Popular romantic fiction’s private, personal, emotional focus on the nuclear family

may be one reason for its low status, reflecting the feminised and relatively low status of the private sphere in contemporary society. Women expressed their embarrassment at enjoying emotionally expressive writing. It could be argued that the books they preferred actually combined the public and the private. The romantic sagas so popular with this group often deal with broad social issues and may have a historical and political backdrop, but still focus on an individual and her romantic and family relationships. Again, these contradictions were useful, leading to critical discussions about the relative merits of public and private roles and the significance of the split itself.

Reading was used to learn about and reflect upon the way different fictional families worked, but that reading was itself influenced by real family attitudes. Women reported the attitudes of their families (including parents and siblings as well as partners and children) towards reading. Many who defined themselves as working-class encountered mixed or negative attitudes to reading when children. Their own partners and children also demonstrated suspicion of this activity, a suspicion which many of the women had internalised. Reading was classified as a form of self-indulgence (taking time for oneself, often done in the bath or in secret). Jessica, a young married mother, always felt it should be combined with some other activity (such as keeping an eye on the children in the garden). Others needed to knit, or watch television at the same time. Sandra, a cohabitee in her twenties, with no children, had had an active rural upbringing with a strong emphasis on self-reliance and physical labour. Reading was not work: "I can't sit down in the middle of the day with a book. ... I've got to be like doing something. It's me. I can't, I can't sit down. ... I never sit in the front room during the day at all." The reference to the "front room" places reading as a leisured activity; the work of the house went on in the "back kitchen".

Fewer women described themselves as middle-class, but these too found that their reading was regulated by their families. Reading for pleasure, and reading popular fiction was often suspect. Middle-class partners were more likely, however, to encourage "serious" reading and even to try to change their partners reading behaviour. Lena, a married

woman in her forties, commented that she read the books of her choice to escape and relax but "if I do start reading my husband always says I switch off everything else, and you know there can be chaos around [...] I will read *anything* if I can get into it [...] if I can read the first few pages and enjoy them or understand them I will carry on, erm if not I tend to put it down and not persevere." Her husband took an entirely different attitude to heavier reading: "my husband's always giving me books to read (laughs) I don't always approve of his collection." In general he strove to improve her cultural pursuits: "my husband's a great one of trying to educate me ...well not educate me broadly and sort of takes me to see all sorts of things ... " It seems as though reading was acceptable if it hurt, but not if it was undertaken for pleasure.

Overwhelmingly, however, regardless of class, women read primarily popular fiction and primarily for pleasure. Moreover, they shared books extensively with other women, swapping, recommending and discussing their reading. Many had been introduced to popular fiction, especially romances, by mothers or other female relations and many continued to share books with these same people. For most readers, then, there was a shared female reading culture, in which they shared reading about intimate, emotionally charged family relationships with their own close female family members. For all these women there was a dichotomy between the popular fiction they read and shared with each other and "legitimate" literature, approved by educational institutions and, in the case of the middle class women, by their families. All reading was suspect in some families but some could be justified if essential for college.

Implications for Practice

Women were extremely interested in exploring the restrictions created by class and poverty; interested in cultural and racial oppression and occupied with thinking about issues such as depression, anorexia, sexual pleasure (or the lack of it), rape and male violence. Neither their reading matter, nor the way they reflected upon it was trivial. But it was pleasurable. They liked to deal with issues in context and in narrative. They wanted to explore how issues might work out in practice, for fictional families and

heroines and to compare these situations with their own. Although there is a considerable amount of data from each woman, this was a small case study (36 women altogether), the sample was not standardised nor were there any men in the study. Within the limits of this study, however, there is evidence that readers are connected with books as individuals and as members of families and communities. Books are part of their worlds and the way they make sense of those worlds. Their identities as members of family and friendship groups are constructed in part through reading processes and their identities as readers are constructed in part by their family and social situations.

As teachers we encourage the exploration of new forms and encourage students to critique those they already know and love. This is essential if we want students to grow and develop, to have an extended repertoire at their disposal and yet it is a risky business. Wholesale disapproval of the popular fiction which forms the substance of many people's reading matter still emanates from some English teachers. If this disapproval is accepted by the student that student faces repudiating her reading past and the reading culture she currently inhabits. The students I worked with showed they had the capacity to operate as immensely sophisticated readers, capable of enjoying and critiquing works simultaneously. This, combined with the emotional commitment made to reading, confirms the importance of approaching the teaching of reading with care. I drew two main pedagogical inferences from the research. Firstly, the research confirms the value of working with students' own reading interests, to create opportunities to explore the reading matter they have always enjoyed in order to build on the insights they have already developed. Such approaches need to be critical. The intention is not to stay with current experience but to use it to develop critical capacities, for "starting with the knowledge of experience had in order to get beyond it is not staying in that knowledge" (Freire, 1997, p. 70). In these cases, the awareness students showed of the contradictions inherent in popular fiction created the opportunity to work towards significant shifts in meaning perspectives and belief systems (Mezirow, 1991). This kind of critically reflective, experiential learning enables students to expand their under-

standing of literature without the wholesale abandonment of their previous tastes. Secondly, when we introduce our students to new works, particularly those which subvert conventional forms and expectations, we need to remember the importance of making connections with their existing understandings. Even apparently straightforward writing seems strange if encountered after a couple of decades of reading family sagas and popular romances, for example. I was astounded by the hostile reaction of many of my students to the opening chapters of *The Magic Toyshop*. One student, Jessica, summarised her sense that the novel had behaved improperly: "We all agreed it was a surprising introduction because of its explicit detailing of what Melanie was doing. I personally disliked the introduction as it was a shock to me. I felt it should have started with more background knowledge of Melanie first. If I had been reading the book for pure leisure I would probably have put it down." In class Jessica, a keen Cookson reader, explained that books should begin more gradually, explaining and introducing the characters and their settings. Her expectations had been violated.

As teachers, we usually do an excellent job of situating texts in their literary historical context. We may need to think more constructively about helping our students to situate the texts within the personal reading histories they have established for themselves.

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