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Framing the text: understanding emotional barriers to academic reading

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Framing the text: understanding emotional barriers to academic reading

Abstract

When students arrive at university there is an expectation that they come already equipped with the skills they need to read academic texts. In contrast, many students have low confidence in their ability to read challenging texts, often experiencing this as a barrier to engaging with academic practices. Recent research has identified the importance of affect in the university context, exploring the impact of emotions around academic practices such as critical thinking and interpreting feedback, but has not looked specifically at reading as one such key practice. This paper draws on this research and reads it alongside data gathered from questionnaires and focus groups conducted with one group of first-year undergraduates. We found that students have a complex relationship with reading for academic study, and that many experience significant negative affects and self-perceptions in relation to their academic reading tasks. We explore some of these encounters, engaging the student voice and using affect theory to unpack some first experiences of reading in higher education.

Keywords

Reading, academic literacies, emotion, affect, learning development

Introduction

Academic reading skills are fundamental to equity and participation in higher education (Baker et al. 2019) because they function as a gateway to other academic practices. However, it can be a difficult area to explore, because barriers to effective reading may be a matter of emotional responses rather than, or as well as, lack of skills. Recent research has identified the importance of affect in the university, exploring the impact of emotions around academic practices such as critical thinking and interpreting feedback (Danvers 2016; Kannan and Miller 2009; Leathwood and Hey 2009; Värlander 2008), but has not looked specifically at reading in this context. Like these other aspects of academic life, reading similarly elicits a range of feelings: students often show discomfort when faced with reading tasks, reporting that they do not see themselves as readers or are not good at reading. Such perceptions of lack of efficacy may be experienced erroneously as signalling personal deficits (Gravett and Winstone 2018); they can stem from a lack of confidence in ability, or from prior experiences interpreted and remembered as failures, but also come from misconceptions around what a 'good' reader is and does. The cognitive effects of this negative thinking have been found to impair ability, creating further barriers to participation in academic tasks (Lyubomirsky et al. 2011; Park et al. 2014). Reading is not solely an intellectual and individual experience: it has relational, embodied, affective, socio-political, and material components involving choices and decisions of which learning developers and academics can make students aware.

This paper focuses on how students feel about reading. Baker et al. (2019) note that research on reading has not incorporated the student voice, focusing largely on issues of reading compliance rather than asking students how they feel about reading and why they might be reluctant to engage. Listening to the student voice is central to gaining an understanding of how students engage with reading on their own terms and why emotions around reading might be key to forming a picture of how students read, as well as to understanding some of the barriers they experience around this foundational area of academic practice. In order to move towards this more student-informed understanding, we focus here on a small group of students and their first experiences of reading at university; we look at how they feel about reading and while reading, and the impacts these reactions have on their experience of learning.

Context

Lea and Street (1998) identified the gatekeeping role of academic literacy practices in Higher Education. Reading and writing are central to the acquisition and assessment of disciplinary knowledge; these processes still form the bulk of student learning activities in most disciplines. While the academic literacies approach has highlighted the role of writing in student identities and in their relationships with the disciplines and institutions within which they learn, there has been a 'significant silence' (Baker et al. 2019) around reading and the relations within which it operates in Higher Education. This omission signals that, while writing is seen as a skill that can be improved through dedicated instruction and practice, competence and confidence in the skills needed for academic reading are often assumed at this level. It also points to a similar gap in pedagogic practice: while writing skills are routinely taught in HE, as part of courses and also through learning development and other support sessions, reading is not often explicitly addressed (Bosley 2008; Bharuthram 2012). Independent reading is a core requirement of most courses in UK HE institutions, and could be seen as more instrumental to students' successful integration in the academy than writing. The ability to read critically and effectively is fundamental as a gateway to disciplinary knowledge in itself, but also through the access it gives to other academic practices such

as online/blended learning, and for its role in supporting students' understanding of the conventions of academic writing within their discipline.

As a result of this omission, ideas about reading in academic disciplines have been slow to respond to the debates around equity and inclusion that are prompting change in other areas. The terms of engagement in academic writing are coming to be seen as malleable. Sword (2012) challenges some of the conventions, such as writing in the third person, that produce 'turgid' academic prose, even though Mewburn argues that students are not necessarily empowered to negotiate the terms of their writing in the face of academic hierarchies and a results-driven culture (Mewburn 2019). The same need for flexibility has not been expressed in terms of academic reading, although Sword expresses the hope that a 'stylistic revolution' in writing will filter down to provide improved reading conditions by developing the general accessibility of academic texts (p.vii). While students operate in an information environment that has increasingly less patience for slow accretions of knowledge via printed text (Weller 2011 p.18-22), the expectation remains that independent reading of texts will form a substantial part of their learning. Where teachers give detailed guidelines for the writing process, instruction on reading is more often limited to standalone strategies such as skimming and scanning, without acknowledging that these do not fully address what students find difficult about reading.

Emotions around academic practices are becoming established as key in considerations of equity of access and inclusion in higher education. Danvers' work on critical thinking has established that students experience complex and shifting affects around the concept of criticality (Danvers 2016; Danvers 2018; Danvers 2019) with their self-perceptions dependent on socio-political positions in terms of gender, race and class. She uses the student voice to explore students' perceptions of criticality and identify the aspects of it that seem troubling or inaccessible. Reading has not yet been examined in these terms, and has been, as Baker et al. (2019) have suggested, 'invisible' as a social practice, often being seen solely as an intellectual and individual experience. Where critical thinking is an abstract concept, reading is a material activity, requiring an embodied encounter with a physical text, whether on a screen or on paper. The fruits of student writing are visible in assessed outputs, but reading is invisible partly for the reason that it is most often done alone and in private. The conceptual positioning of any academic practice as individual has implications on how students perceive and relate to that practice, and also on how that practice can be supported. Struggles with academic reading are often hidden; students are more likely to present with difficulties in writing, planning or thinking. They are often unaware that these skills are undermined by a lack of the foundational reading necessary to generate content or build an in-depth understanding of a subject.

In the context of writing, Danvers, Hinton-Smith and Webb (2019) see collective and public support around academic practices as a way of challenging 'dominant neoliberal discourses' that promote individual responsibility and hide the social and political contexts of scholarly activity. These individualising discourses push responsibility for social inequalities manifested in reading back onto the student, through concepts such as resilience and inclusion (Burke 2017, p.433). The student who does not match up to his or her ideal of 'a reader' then experiences 'misrecognition' (Burke 2017, p.434), and is left to deal with troublesome affects, particularly shame, in private. With reading this is particularly true as, beyond childhood, it is rare for reading to be a shared experience. While it might be uncomfortable for some students and teachers, in terms of equality it could be important to bring personal and relational aspects of reading to the fore in the learning experience, to recognize them as embedded in political structures, and as raising issues around the distribution and transfer of knowledge that invoke and sustain academic hierarchies. Taken together, these studies suggest that it might be important to think about how students experience reading, and to be aware that these experiences can form a powerful and cumulative force shaping a student's academic self-perception.

Methodology

This paper takes a phenomenological approach to understanding how students experience reading. It explores a case study drawing on data gathered from a questionnaire and focus group conducted with 14 first-year undergraduates on an arts BA course at a UK post-92 university. Results are then discussed in the light of observations made in teaching sessions supporting and exploring academic reading. Full ethical approval was gained for this study and participants gave informed consent. These students were chosen because they study a creative programme with a practical focus that nevertheless involves reading of difficult texts from the very beginning of the first year. Modules on cultural theory represent for most of these students their first encounter with a range of challenging texts from authors such as Adorno and Derrida, therefore providing a pertinent sample for this research on how students feel about difficult academic reading tasks.

Two weeks into the course, we gave students a Learning Development workshop covering aspects of academic reading. At the beginning of the workshop we used a questionnaire to provide prompts for students to explore their thoughts and feelings around reading for study. Questions aimed to find out about: 1) students' perceptions and self-perceptions around reading (whether they saw themselves as readers and what that meant); 2) reading habits; and 3) emotions experienced during and around reading. The questionnaire also made space for students to reflect privately on their feelings around reading. Students were then given short articles from academic journals in an area relating to the cultural theory topic they were studying that week. We presented the academic text on paper as a scroll: the pages were taped alongside each other, and the article rolled out and displayed in its entirety so that students could gain an overview of the resource. The intention behind presenting the journal article as a scroll in this workshop was to help students gain familiarity with the physical shape and components of academic texts in their field, and 'to offer a more welcoming, accessible, collaborative and dialogic encounter with reading than the codex' or bound book where a maximum of two facing pages are visible at any one time (Abegglen et al. 2019). We hoped that this would allow for a more thoughtful and empowering encounter with these difficult written texts. Students were then given pre-reading tasks aimed at familiarising them with the structure of academic texts and teaching skills such as skimming and scanning for information.

During the workshop activities, the participating researcher made semi-structured notes of verbal and nonverbal expressions of affect in relation to the activities undertaken. Denham and Onwuegbuzie (2013) argue that the "thick description" that can be obtained by looking at nonverbal communication is fundamentally important in qualitative research (p.670), and see its under-use as an, "important error of omission" (p.690). As affect is experienced through the body, it is especially important to acknowledge the multi-layered nature of these experiences; they represent an area where the privilege given to verbal expression can usefully be challenged. Data from questionnaires was coded using an inductive process to draw out points of interest as well as positive, negative and neutral reactions to reading. These themes were then compared to details emerging from the notes on nonverbal communication and used to guide the development of questions for a focus group. Six weeks later we conducted the focus group. Students reflected on the reading workshop and discussed their feelings around academic reading in more depth. The transcript was then analysed to build on themes already identified and draw out additional points.

The aim of these engagements was to explore students' first and subsequent responses to academic reading and to identify some of the entanglements and overlaps between their growing sense of identity as students and this fundamental area of academic practice. As teachers with an awareness of 'skills' as embedded in social, emotional and material concerns – rather than being an isolated intellectual discipline – we wanted to understand what support students need to engage with difficult

reading material as a social and academic practice. In the rest of this paper we will explore some of the reactions and responses we encountered, firstly in the reading workshop and then from the questionnaires and focus group. We will read these in the light of emerging ideas around affect and pedagogy. Finally, we will draw out some of the implications in terms of providing support to student readers.

Reactions to the Workshop on Academic Reading

The students in the session responded to the scrolls in a way that was not predicted by the researchers. Instead of interacting with the entire text in this form, they preferred to disassemble the scroll and instead chose to read it in codex form, page by page. Some students asked if there was a copy to view online, and then chose to use this instead of the scroll. We experienced the same reaction on other modules with different cohorts of students. When asked, students who made these choices said that seeing the entirety of the text in one view was ‘intimidating’ and ‘overwhelming’, and that they did not like having to move around the space of the written text physically. This could suggest that, while scrolls can be a useful tool for working with students on reading, a staged approach to revealing an academic text is sometimes necessary for students with low reading confidence who may find the initial exposure to a challenging text overwhelming. We could also interpret this reaction as a need for differentiating reading tasks in terms of approach as well as in terms of content. Whereas some students are happy to work with text-scrolls or a physical text, others prefer to encounter the text in the more familiar and perhaps more private settings of their laptops and smartphones.

It was noticeable that many students showed physical markers of discomfort in response to the activity. These included: defensive postures such as standing/sitting with arms crossed; an unwillingness to approach the text physically; pushing the text away, or repeatedly picking it up and putting it down; and signals of discomfort such as blushing, downcast gaze and shifting/shuffling. Some of these expressions can be coded in relation to specific emotions such as shame, embarrassment, or frustration. Burke (2017) argues that shame is a hidden but important component of relationships and practices in higher education, signalling invisible power relations in pedagogic practices; shame “exacerbates feelings of not belonging and disconnection as well as sensibilities of unworthiness” (p.431). Signs of shame can be observed in a significant proportion of students required to encounter reading tasks in the social context of the classroom. Verbal comments reinforced this impression of discomfort: “I don’t get it”; “I can’t do reading”; “I’ve never been any good at this”. These expressions functioned as disclaimers before the activity started; students moderated their discomfort by attempting to reduce expectations and by displaying negative self-perceptions around reading. Although the students complied with the instructions given, there was a strong sense of disengagement at the beginning of the exercise. It is possible that this disengagement was a defensive strategy for some students, who felt more comfortable to take a back seat in the activity. Eliciting feedback from the activity was also a difficult moment for less confident participants. Again, they prefaced findings with disclaimer statements: “This is probably wrong”; “I’m probably saying the wrong things”; “I don’t know if this is what you want but...”. While the affects at work behind these responses need further investigation, our encounters showed us that the responses themselves are not uncommon.

Some of the discomfort students felt may have been focused around the shared act of reading. Experiencing practical academic reading tasks communally in such a public arena can expose troublesome affects that would often be encountered only in private, reopening old wounds around reading and invoking memories of previous negative experiences, which are re-encountered as

embodied reactions. Research has demonstrated that re-encountering the ghosts of these prior negative experiences during the completion of tasks can create ‘performance-related worries that disrupt the working memory needed for the task at hand’ (Park et al. 2014, p.103), producing a level of ‘cognitive interference’ that can impair reading comprehension (Lyubomirsky et al. 2011, p.1153). In the workshop, discomfort seemed to increase with lack of familiarity; students felt more confident on familiar ground. This highlights a weakness in the teaching of cultural theory: when students are asked to read material which has a high level of abstraction and unfamiliarity, confidence then becomes a much bigger factor in responses. This then widens the gap between students who have access to a positive mindset and those who do not. Rendering these affects visible in the classroom can feel uncomfortable, but it is important to remember that, whether or not they are acknowledged openly, these experiences will form a backchannel to learning in any text-based discipline. Working with negative emotions, instead of acceding to the narratives that would position them as individual and invisible, can have positive influences within processes of learning (Kanaan and Miller 2009), creating transition points that can function as springboards for personal development and understanding around a skill.

Perceptions and Self-Perceptions Around Reading

The questionnaires and focus groups completed as part of this research revealed a number of themes in relation to students’ perceptions of or emotions around reading. Students reported finding academic reading difficult, but also were aware that there are interesting and useful things to find in their academic texts. The barriers to finding these points of interest were disengagement due to the level of difficulty the texts presented, and a sense of reading as an activity that is peripheral. Students felt they were balancing the value they might gain from the texts with the time commitment necessary to read them. We look in this section at this context as a scene of engagement, at the reasons for the perceived difficulty of academic texts, and at the affective barriers these present.

Nine out of the fourteen students surveyed on the course said that they did not identify themselves as readers, with one more student giving an ambivalent response depending on context. Even those who conceptualised themselves as readers felt less comfortable with academic reading as opposed to reading for leisure. This could be because whereas students perceive general reading as a largely passive activity, reading as an academic practice involves a level of participative criticality for which they feel less confident. Decisions and judgements about what to read, how to read, and how to use reading start to be experienced as central and conscious rather than peripheral, automatic decisions, therefore requiring confidence in the ability to evaluate and make choices. Staff and Farmer (2019) argue that students in ‘hands on’ disciplines such as the creative arts are more likely to ‘confer [...] a level of anxiety and intellectual estrangement’ onto tasks such as academic writing (p.138); these academic practices, reading included, are perhaps seen by students as peripheral to their core learning practices that involve doing, making or performing, or the ‘reading’ of non-text-based media. In the focus group students expressed a sense that reading was not seen as a core activity:

I don't know, I guess because we're, like, music students, we like to play music rather than, like, read a book about it, so it's quite hard to sit down and just read and then even maybe it's about something you're not too bothered about, that's even harder.

I'd rather invest [...] two hours making music instead of reading, actually. I know it sounds weird, but it's my personal opinion. I know reading is really necessary, [hesitates] because of the course and everything, but [hesitates] I'd rather just invest those two hours making music and making something new [...].

There is a clear sense here of reading as not being seen as generative or productive in the same way as the creative skills used for their discipline. Students are aware that they ought to read – in both the questionnaire and focus group they described reading as ‘necessary’, something you do because you have to – but when they talked about the emotions they experience during the process of reading students reported feelings of frustration and concerns about wasting time:

It can feel like you've got all these deadlines coming up and the reading can feel like a waste of time 'cause you're reading and not like working on anything. [...] And then you get all, like, frustrated when you're reading it because you're not doing the work. And you don't want to stop reading in case you get something out of it, but you need to do the work.

Reading, here, is experienced as the opposite of ‘working’ or ‘doing’; students are aware that they should be finding value in a text but, when points of value are difficult to find, students experience a sense of having to weigh the time taken reading against the more pressing exigencies of the course. In this context students are unsure of where best to spend their time.

If reading is invisible as a social practice (Abegglen et al. 2019), perhaps it can also become invisible as work. This could be a result of the fact that in academic support activities reading is not given as much time and space as other areas of academic literacies such as writing. Students experience a struggle to know how to make reading visible in their written texts. Even students with a strong interest in reading, as reported by the student below, can feel conflicted about the value of reading in this context:

It's sometimes quite interesting, but same as [Student above] said that if I have two, you know like, two assessments, and things like that, maybe I feel like focused on the things I have to do that have a deadline.

The awareness of reading as an essential component of their academic degree is undercut by these time pressures, and by the reality of their encounters with the written text, which were more often described as ‘tricky’ or ‘frustrating’ or ‘confusing’ than as experienced as valuable encounters.

Students had a clear perception of academic texts as more difficult than other things they read. Responses from the questionnaire described academic texts as ‘harder’, ‘difficult’ and ‘more challenging’ than other texts. Part of this was related to academic reading being seen as ‘necessary’ and therefore ‘not enjoyable’. Students particularly pinpointed the language and structure of academic texts as being a key reason for their difficulty. One student expressed frustration that the texts often fail to “get to the point” or “say exactly what it is they’re talking about”. The comments represented a sense that the ideas within a text would be more accessible if the language was clearer. In the focus group, some students admitted waiting for the lecture/seminar with their tutor with the expectation that the tutor’s interpretations would present the ideas in more accessible language:

It's like, why read it and then really struggle to understand it when she's going to explain why [...] much better than what you would if you were trying to read it and struggling to understand it?

There was a feeling in the group, amplified by other similar comments, that instead of doing the pre-reading in order to understand the lecture, the lecture would contain the explanations students needed to understand the reading. For students studying in a second language, especially, these perceptions were amplified by the time taken to translate words and phrases, and many students experience additional layers of difficulty around approaching academic texts, either from dyslexia or language barriers. From all students there was an emphasis on additional skills being needed to 'decode' the texts. This process of deciphering was seen as key to forming an understanding that would allow them to select the most important ideas and therefore render the text useful. One student talked about motivation to read as contingent on being easily able to find relevant and usable material, saying that her favourite reading experiences happened when she found a resource "that's actually relevant... that actually works."

Emotions Around Reading

Students experienced mixed emotions around reading. Both the questionnaires and the focus group revealed what students *did* enjoy about their texts: that certain elements within the texts would stimulate 'interest' or a feeling of being 'interested', but this depended heavily on the context and whether the reading was engaging. While on the one hand they held the ideal of reading as a good and necessary activity, to which their tutors ascribed very positive affective values, the overwhelming sense was that the affects encountered in anticipation of reading and during reading were mostly negative. As observed in the reading workshop, the questionnaires and focus group revealed that students experience substantial negative affect around reading as an activity. Emotional reactions to reading were described most often in negative terms with words like 'boredom', 'stress' and 'frustration' cropping up repeatedly. Students associated reading with other negative emotions such as 'panic', 'confusion' and 'annoyance', and a few comments also mentioned that reading provoked feelings of 'tiredness': "It just makes me feel tired. Just looking at it makes my eyes go to sleep."

It was acknowledged that difficult texts can cause a feeling of wanting to 'shut down'. This is consistent with the physical reactions to the text observed during sessions on reading, with students wanting to push the text away or turn away from it, or reduce the amount of text encountered in one view. The text here is experienced as too much; an experience of overwhelm rather than one of value. A student who responds to the text presented with a feeling of wanting to shut down or turn away will be getting little if any value from the encounter.

Ahmed (2010) argues that the disparity between expectations and experiences of affect in relation to an object or practice – the gap between 'affective value' and experience – produces feelings of alienation. The affective community of the university seems to share a consensus that reading is good, and students are aware that they 'ought' to read. For students, a failure to experience reading as good and useful in this context constructs them as "affect aliens" (p.37). The text therefore becomes a complex object as it is repeatedly constructed by tutors as essential to disciplinary knowledge, but these 'frustrating' or 'confusing' experiences of reading are layered. In the focus group, one student described a piece of course reading as "18 pages of brick wall and text". This image of the text as an impenetrable and impassable barrier gives a tangible sense of the gatekeeping function of the written text and how students might feel excluded when the way through is not clear.

In this context it is perhaps unsurprising that students felt demotivated in response to reading tasks. If they feel alienation in terms of the affective expectations of the university, this is often amplified by the class-based connotations of academic language. Cultural theory readings were characterised by some students as ‘posh’ or ‘pretentious’, with their difficult vocabulary obfuscating and obstructing attempts to interpret and find meaning. These comments touch on the links between reading and equity mentioned by Baker et al. (2019, p.143). Inaccessible language invites or perhaps forces students to position themselves as *other* in relation to the text, in alignment with toxic notions of hierarchy within the academy, by withholding the availability of meaning to groups who may find these modes of expression less familiar. This social positioning is also visible in the words students use to describe readers. Words most often used about readers were ‘smart’, ‘intelligent’ and ‘intellectual’. Some stereotypes around reading were invoked, with students defining a reader as a studious person in a quiet environment, perhaps wearing glasses. These images suggest focus and concentration, which were also mentioned as attributes of a reader. One positive finding was that many students were aware of and actively sought to resist such stereotypes, arguing in response to the question that a reader is “just a normal person” or “could be anyone”, although there was no noticeable correlation between this more inclusive definition of a reader and whether students identified themselves as readers.

Many of the comments described a reader as a person with a book. This might indicate that reading activities are still associated with the book as an object, and students are not seeing as equally valid the everyday acts of taking in information from their smartphones, tablets and other digital devices. This reflects conversations with students in sessions on reading and their reading habits. Students often state that they are not readers, yet when prompted with a definition of reading that includes all and any text from all sources, they begin to reveal that reading is an activity with which they engage regularly, mostly through screens. One student reported that their first port of call for reading is the internet because “I find that you have way more accessibility to texts that you can actually understand”. There is a perception that information from websites is more accessible; perhaps this is because students are searching for summaries that can help them to interpret the more detailed information found in books and journal articles. In response to the questionnaire answers, we might also ask: what does it mean not to see oneself as a reader in a university, where the expectation is that students navigate their way autonomously through a primarily text-based educational landscape? Although reading was constructed as beneficial in an academic context, students replied vaguely in discussions about what those benefits might be. They saw the reading strategically in terms of its links to assignments. This might signal a gap in expectations between students and tutors. Whereas tutors set reading tasks to give students a grounding in their discipline, including the knowledge needed for a global understanding of the subject, the focus of students, on the other hand, is often toward reading strategically to find content for assignments. Students expressed a wish for support to focus reading toward material that shows clear lines of relation to tasks:

A lot of it will end up being, like, either not important to what we're doing or unrelated, or not, not necessarily that but I mean, like, if we're given along with the reading what we should get out of it... Maybe like a little question to go with the reading to answer.

Students wanted to find a purpose from their reading rather than to ‘fa[ff] about’. This might suggest that useful transition activities for supporting reading would empower them to find this purpose themselves. Perhaps it also suggests that support is needed specifically for the reading of difficult texts such as journal articles or cultural theory, as these require an entirely different approach from

the techniques students are using when they collect information from more directly accessible sources online. When students express discomfort with the ‘difficult surface’ (Barry 2006) of theoretical texts, encounters in the classroom could emphasise the importance of developing some tolerance for such difficulty, and patience with oneself in relation to it. Barry usefully points out that readers often look for their own deficiencies in response to difficult texts, finding the reasons for their lack of comprehension in their own flaws (Barry 2006). This may particularly be the case where a student has prior experiences of negative affect in relation to reading which are cumulative in reinforcing negative self-perceptions in relation to reading as well as having a negative effect on the student’s ability to respond cognitively to the text at each encounter (Lyubomirsky 2011). A perceived failure to understand reading damages the reader’s identity, and the affective baggage accrued in the attempt makes it more likely that the next encounter with a text will also be experienced as a failure.

As a remedy for this problem, Barry suggests an approach that encompasses both skills and emotions. It has been established that a focus on skills around academic practices can detract from the socio-political discourses in which they operate, pushing the responsibility for a social problem back onto the individual student. For these students, the ‘right’ kind of reader would be a ‘studious’ and ‘intellectual’ person, with the time and leisure to sit somewhere quiet and the focus to read for long periods. This reader would be able to understand incredibly complex texts and be able to easily draw out points of relevance. In their questionnaire responses, most of the students wrote themselves out of this image with comments suggesting that they lack the concentration or focus of this ideal reader. Perhaps some of the work to do is around validating the reading practices they already have, and showing how they can use these to construct themselves as readers, developing reading practices that build bridges between their actual and ideal ways of reading.

Suggestions for Supporting Reading

Drawing on Barry’s suggestion of approaches that speak to both skills and emotions (2006), and Lillis’s work on designing dialogic approaches to academic writing (2003), this study finds two calls to action. Firstly, while acknowledging that the dialogic encounter can feel risky (Lillis 2003), space should be made for conversations around academic reading, addressing expectations openly and engaging with students in what Lillis calls ‘talkback’, as opposed to feedback, or a focus on dialogue around the processes of reading rather than a ‘closed commentary’ on the end product (p.204). One way of doing this is to open the floor for students’ stories around reading, and to encourage discussions around how previous experiences inform encounters with the texts they study. As Barry suggests, feelings of frustration, confusion and boredom should be treated without judgement. In her review of academic writing, Sword suggests that feelings of inadequacy in response to reading difficult texts are not unusual (2012, p.4); it would be difficult to avoid such initial responses, but by opening discussion around them we can empower students to move beyond them. With the, “need to reexamine what counts as relevant knowledge” in mind (Lillis 2003, p.205), students could be encouraged to be more closely involved in making choices around what and how they read, as well as to understand the rationale behind the choices made for them on their reading lists. Making the decisions involved in reading visible in the classroom may be a way of working to reveal and validate the variety of different choices students make. In the context of *feeling* like a reader, and validating existing reading practices, it might be interesting to see how and whether students who are conscious of the choices they can make around reading approach texts differently. If the text can become a ‘happy object’ for these students (Ahmed 2010), and the university can work to open more empowering discourses around reading, perhaps a closer alignment of affects could take place.

Secondly, we suggest that hidden anxieties and negative affects around reading could be disrupted by bringing reading into the social space of the classroom, rather than setting it solely as independent pre-work, and using a playful, activity-based approach in its integration. The feeling of overwhelm that some students expressed could be addressed with bridging activities that break down the reading process into more manageable chunks. These might include activities used in language teaching – acknowledging that decoding academic writing is a skill – such as building glossaries, using questions to focus comprehension, and ‘translating’ the meaning of key passages using more relatable language and examples. As with our experience of using scrolls, these experiments might not find complete success with every cohort, but the aim of a focus on the processes of reading is to allow students space to engage holistically with texts without feeling the spectre of the ideal reader hovering at their shoulder.

Conclusion

This research set out to unpack an image of the first-year undergraduate reader, and has identified common threads of affect between reading and other aspects of academic life such as critical thinking and feedback recipience. Although it only delivers a snapshot of a narrow cohort of readers at one university, it makes a case for reading as an area of academic practice which is particularly burdened with affect, suggesting that support for reading cannot be truly effective unless it engages with a wider context than that of academic skills. When we work with written texts, affective responses to the process of reading are invariably invoked. Gathering perceptions about academic reading will have value in terms feeding into our strategies for supporting reading within our own institution, but we hope that it will also have a wider impact in terms of contributing to an understanding of affects revealed in the process of reading for academic study. There is scope for further research to explore in more detail the ways in which these affects correspond to social, class-based and gendered experiences. Learning to critique the norms of discourse in higher education – including self-perceptions around notions of readers and reading – can give students a sense of purpose (Zepke 2018). This research suggests that educators should develop an awareness of how we frame encounters with academic reading, especially for first-year undergraduate students, taking their affective responses into account. Working with the troublesome affects and negative perceptions that act as barriers to reading might clear the air to support more positive encounters with difficult texts.

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