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Title

Cultivating a culture for reading within Higher Education

This is a reflective piece from an individual who attended the Becoming Well Read Symposium 2021. The reflections are centred around three interlinked considerations regarding the challenges and opportunities for cultivating a reading culture within Higher Education. These reflections were inspired from listening to the keynote speaker of the event.

Keywords: Academic reading; emulation; barriers to reading

Whilst it is well recognised and acknowledged that reading is a fundamental activity associated with studying, developing a positive and successful academic reading culture for students remains an ongoing challenge within Higher Education (Elliot et al, 2019). On March 31st 2021, I had the pleasure of attending and facilitating at Keele University's annual Becoming Well Read Symposium. This event provided me with the opportunity to listen, learn and gain new insight into innovative best practices being implemented across Higher Education institutions in order to assist students' academic reading and writing capabilities. Although I attended a number of thought-provoking sessions, in this reflective piece, I would like to share the thoughts and observations raised from listening to the keynote speaker, Professor Karen Fitzgibbon, Faculty Head of Learning, Teaching and Student Experience from the University of South Wales. Professor Fitzgibbon shared reflections on her observations and approaches to reading within university environments and highlighted some of the challenges and changes to modelling this particular academic activity. In this reflective piece I will provide three interlinked observations inspired from listening to Professor Fitzgibbon.

Reading as a hidden activity

Although students, staff and faculties generally agree on the value of academic reading, there are ongoing disparities and contradictions in the practices and activities undertaken by educational instructors to effectively encourage students in reading engagement (Howard et al, 2018). Professor Fitzgibbon's keynote speech highlighted an interesting observation related to the acknowledgement that university staff cannot always be easily observed engaging with reading, due to it not being made a public activity within university communities. The implications of this are that whilst reading is indicated as an integral part of university life, if it remains a hidden behaviour to students then it reduces an observable culture for them to recognise and replicate. The consideration of university staff making reading more of a public process reinforces the consideration of emulation as pedagogical tool. 'Practicing what you preach' helps to drive emotions and behaviour and enhances authenticity in the eyes of students (Yair, 2008; Kindeberg, 2013). This is not to suggest that by simply reading in public spaces that the challenges with engagement will be instantly overcome. However, it helps to reinvigorate the role of staff to encourage students to 'do as they do' rather than 'do as they say'. The concept of reading in public made me realise that if I do not show my students that I am putting this activity at the forefront of my daily actions, how can I expect my students to respect the value of reading?

Making time to read

A further observation provided by the keynote speaker alluded to the consideration of how the perception of time impacts reading activities. Reading is not only important as a recreational pastime, but also a vital steppingstone in formulating ideas, extending knowledge and translating thoughts into new outputs. Nevertheless, a lack of reading, or understanding academic reading, has been identified as a barrier to effective academic writing for students. Whilst some of the barriers are related to interest levels or readability of academic texts, perception of having time to read has been identified as an issue amongst students (Itua et al, 2012; St Clair-Thompson et al, 2018). There are a number of implications leading from this perception of time pressure to dedicate to academic reading; it can lead to the process of 'strategic reading' whereby the motivation to engage with certain texts is more likely to transpire if it is perceived to help achieve a particular desired output such as assessment creation or improved degree classification (Strurzaker, 2014; Sjølie, 2015); it diminishes the opportunity to nurture and develop students and staff as competent readers (Alexander, 2012); it further reinforces a sensitivity regarding the perceptions of light and heavy reading loads, which is a concerning source of student dissatisfaction and teaching evaluation (Howard et al, 2018). The recognition of the negative impact time pressure has on student reading habits reinforces the need to provide more explicit instruction and time allocated to practicing reading as part of

teaching activities. This would help to put it at the forefront of study habits, rather than relegating it to a self-directed action as part of modules and programmes (Howard et al, 2018).

Sharing the pleasure of reading

The final poignant observation gained from the keynote speaker was in relation to the value of sharing past, present and future reading choices. As Professor Fitzgibbon discussed the books that she had been looking at, and the thoughts and reflections gained from them, it sparked a memory within me of the joy of reading something new and sharing it with others. Although it is suggested that university libraries need to further promote a culture for reading (Dewan, 2013; Hurst, 2017), it is also a responsibility for those who are teaching. Students value professors and lecturers who are clearly passionate about their subjects and share their thoughts and experiences with them (Yair, 2008). Therefore, I realised that perhaps there is an opportunity here for academics to share more of their own personal reading activities, both in and around their discipline areas, to help further develop student relationships and engagement. Encouraging an open and continuous dialogue between staff and students breaks down the concept of reading as an individualistic process and enhances a collective culture towards this academic endeavour within universities.

From reflection to practice

So, what was the main take away point for me from the symposium to feedforward into my educational practice? To lead by example. Listening to the keynote speaker reawakened my passion for reading and re-established the responsibility I have to evoke this same passion and attainability within my students. It has helped me to start developing a reading portfolio to share with my students to encourage me, and them, to read more frequently and share our thoughts and experiences with one another. It has encouraged me to make more time to read and when I do, to do it in public shared spaces (Covid permitted!). Since reading is such an important and integral part of not only university study, but also lifelong learning, then it deserves to be seen as a day-to-day activity within Higher Education Institutions.

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