Exploring student and staff experiences of reading in higher education

Dr Saranne Weller
King’s College London
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Reading practices at university

- Study skills orientation to student reading
- ‘relative invisibility of the reading process’ (van Pletzen, 2006)
- Reading provides an insight into learning preparedness & critical thinking (Saltmarsh & Saltmarsh, 2008)
- Apprenticeship pedagogy of reading (Linkon, 2005)
‘Academic literacies’ approach to reading

- Student literacies are outcome of ‘social practices’ rather than instrumental skills or socialisation (Lea & Street, 1998)
- Focus on individual, disciplinary & institutional identities
- Recognise the resources students bring to the academy
Switching practices & handling identities

‘a dominant feature of academic literacy practices is the requirement to switch practices between one setting and another, to deploy a repertoire of linguistic practices appropriately to each setting, and to handle the social meanings and identities that each evokes’

(Lea & Street, 2000: 35)
Researching student reading

Comparing lecturer and student reading

- Case study of 4 lecturers & 6 students
- American Studies, Comparative Literature, Theology & English.
- Semi-structured interview
- Weller (2010)

Lecturer experiences of reading in a new discipline

- Case study of 4 lecturers in the context of a PGCAP
- Pre-reading task using textual annotations (Feito & Donohue, 2008)
- Semi-structured interview (Mann, 2000)
- Weller, forthcoming
Textual creation or the expression of “points of view”

‘I think it’s important that students understand what reading is – how the reader creates the text […] they understand they are going to read from certain points of view but I am more interested actually in their awareness of the way in which they create the text by their reading’

(Lecturer, American Studies)

‘different points of view’

(Student, Theology)

‘people’s opinions [and] often you are almost persuaded to treat them on a par with the text itself, which they’re not’

(Student, Comparative Literature)
Defamiliarising or domesticating

‘If I am going back over something I am going to use for writing a lecture, I will be trying to put it into categories which will be easy to get across [...] so in a way it’s a caricaturing process so that they’ll get the message. Initially a caricaturing and then, on the back of that, specifying’

(Lecturer, Theology)

‘Like for one book we’ve just read – it’s very, very depressing at the end. And it made no sense to me why it had to be so depressing. So I spent a lot of time trying to rationalise it and ended up coming with a fairly different thesis’

(Student, American Studies)
Critical reading as close reading

‘What I normally do in lectures is that I gloss that primary text [...] I also encourage them to [...] pay attention to the detail, to the textual details and [...] language because that’s what signifies, that’s what’s important for a literary critic or a critical reader of literature’

(Lecturer, English)

‘I sat in the library with it with a pencil and literally tore every paragraph up. And there was scribble all over it because I needed to know why the author had done that and if I could see certain patterns that were throughout the book’

(Student, American Studies)
Pedagogic implications

Questions for lecturers:

• How to support students to understand the relatedness of perspectives on texts?
• How to develop students’ understanding of their situatedness as readers?
• How to teach close reading as intra- and intertextual rather than as deciphering?
Reading pedagogic research: Does reading expertise make a difference?

Lecturer accounts of reading pedagogic research:

- Positioning as disciplinary insider/outsider
- Academic and non-academic readings
- Personal experience as validation
Identity and reading new texts

- ‘annoyed when I wasn’t understanding it so I was more criticising myself...felt it was my fault that I didn’t understand’ (Alison)
- Pedagogic research as ‘manifesto’ (Martin) or ‘more like reading the Sunday newspaper’ (Sarah)
- ‘it starts to become a personally-valued paper. It starts to be about what [the author’s] values are...it has obviously picked up on something that is very value-based for me and I think by this point I start to skim read because I don’t like this argument anymore’ (Martin)
Conclusions

- Reveal differences between expert and novice ways of describing literacy practices
- Is the absence of a way of talking about reading a text the same as the absence of a way of reading a text?
- Do complex accounts of reading demonstrate cooption into a disciplinary scholarly community?
- Can expertise as a critical reader translate from one context to another?
References