JOURNAL OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

YOUR CLASSROOM • YOUR STAFFROOM • YOUR FUTURE

'A WORD AFTER A WORD IS POWER': REFLECTIONS ON READING IN SECONDARY ENGLISH

JACKIE MANUEL

Jackie Manuel reflects on the nature of, and importance of, teaching reading in Secondary English. She encourages teachers to utilise their student's experiences to increase their engagement in reading for pleasure...

INTRODUCTION

When I look back, I am so impressed again with the life-giving power of literature. If I were a young person today, trying to gain a sense of myself in the world, I would do that again by reading, just as I did when I was young.

Maya Angelou

As English teachers, one of our abiding aspirations is to foster our students' intrinsic motivation to read. We know that this intrinsic motivation is sparked when students derive personal rewards, satisfaction and enjoyment from their growing command and confident use of language. We also know that the motivation to read depends on a purpose that has meaning for the individual (cf. Dickenson, 2014).

We may read for myriad reasons including for pleasure, curiosity, information, connection, solace or sanctuary, or to be transported beyond the ordinary. So, in every sense, the act of reading can be understood as part of the identity work that lies at the heart of English.

Some decades ago, Scholes (1985) encapsulated this relationship between language, reading, writing and identity when he argued that:

… reading and writing are important because we read and write our world as well as our texts and are read and written by them in turn. Texts are places where power and weakness become visible and discussable, where learning and ignorance manifest themselves, where the structures that enable and constrain our thoughts and actions become palpable. This is why the humble subject 'English' is so important (p. xi).

His insights still resonate, perhaps with even greater force in our fast-faced, technology-driven, language-dense and image-laden context. The assumptions embedded in this rationale are worth considering for their enduring relevance and include:

- a view of students as active meaning-makers, reading and writing their identity and their world;
- the symbiotic relationship between reading, writing, interiority and agency;
- reading and writing as social and communal ('our' / 'we') as well as individual pursuits; and
- the political implications of reading and writing for expanding and empowering, or conversely, constraining 'our thoughts and actions'.

In this article, I share some reflections on teaching reading in secondary English. These reflections formed part of the first session of the 2022 Centre for Professional Learning Secondary English Conference.

STARTING WITH THE SELF

Garth Boomer, the eminent Australian educator, wrote that:

[w]e are in hard times, when money and imagination is short; patience must be long. In order to make struggle and survival possible, we need to make explicit to ourselves and others (in so far as we can) the way the world is wagging (1991, n.p.).

It may come as a surprise to know that Boomer made this observation thirty-two years ago (1991). That his words speak to our present moment perhaps suggests the extent to which 'struggle and survival' are ever-present to some extent in our work as English teachers. Boomer's message about the way through is plain: start with (and keep returning to) the self as the literal and metaphorical 'still point' that can enable us to sustain our passion, drive and aspirations. Articulating our philosophy, beliefs and values can reconnect us with those generative forces that shaped our initial decision to teach. It can also clarify

and fortify our purpose when navigating 'hard times'.

When it comes to reading, 'starting with the self' means taking the time to reflect on our own practices, preferences and attitudes. The prompts below may assist you and your students to consider the characteristics of your reading lives and to then explore the implications of your responses for your teaching and students' learning.

Your reading life: Reflection prompts

- Do you read?
- Do you read regularly beyond the administrative and assessment demands of work?
- If so, how often do you read and what kinds of reading to you prefer?
- How would you describe yourself as a reader?
- What conditions do you require to read?
- Do you believe reading for pleasure is important. If so, why? If not, why not?
- Do you read to/with your students? If so, how often?
- Do you share your reading experiences, practices and preferences with others, including students?
- Do you prefer to read on a device or read a hard copy, or a combination of both?

As teachers, our philosophy necessarily includes, and indeed influences, our pedagogical beliefs and actions. For this reason, it is also instructive to reflect on our current approach to teaching reading by asking questions such as those suggested here.

Teaching reading: Reflection prompts

- What is your rationale and philosophy for teaching reading?
- Do you make visible, regular time in class for reading?
- How much of the in-class reading material is selected by you?
- Do students have any choice in what they read in English?
- Do you know what your students' reading habits and preferences are?
- How much student reading is tied to assessment and why?
- Do students engage in reading a diverse range of texts?
- Do students have the opportunity to read for pleasure and do you explicitly model and encourage this?
- What are your strategies for supporting disengaged, reluctant or resistant readers?
- Do students usually have a purpose for reading that is explicitly linked to their worlds?
- Is there class time available for individual and/or shared reading and discussion about reading that is not linked to assessment?
- Do your students prefer reading on devices or with a hard copy, or a combination of both?

Implicit in a number of these reflection prompts is the premise that learning best occurs when we activate, and then harness, the capital each learner brings to new situations or contexts. By capital, I mean the store of distinctive personal knowledge, skills and understandings shaped by:

- lived experience;
- passions and interests;
- memories;
- observations; and
- imagination.

The work of Gee (1996) offers additional insights into the value of students' language and experience capital – what he terms 'Primary Discourses' – as the basis for acquiring skills and knowledge to meet the more formal language demands of the classroom and society more broadly (Secondary Discourses). As Gee explains, Discourses are:

"ways of being in the world, or forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, gestures, attitudes and social identities … A Discourse is a sort of identity kit, which comes complete with the appropriate … instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular social role that others will recognise" (1996, p. 127).

He describes Primary discourses as 'those to which people are apprenticed early in life … as members of particular families within their sociocultural settings … [They] constitute our first social identity. They form our initial taken-for-granted understandings of who we are' (Gee,1996, p. 127).

In contrast, Secondary Discourses 'are those to which people are apprenticed as part of their socialisations within various … groups and institutions outside early home and peer-group socialisation … They constitute the meaningfulness of our 'public' (more formal) acts' (Gee, 1996, p. 137).

Students come to secondary school with ownership of,

and confidence in, using the Primary Discourses they have developed through their everyday lives beyond school. Success in school, however, requires the increasing mastery of Secondary Discourses. These, for example, are the specialist discourses of subjects, essays, assessments and examinations. These discourses must be taught and learned.

Effective pedagogy recognises and builds on a student's Primary Discourses as the foundation for initiating them into the necessary Secondary Discourses of the worlds of school, work and society more broadly. This, in turn, develops students' understanding of how language functions to produce, reproduce or challenge power; and to exclude, include or marginalise. Without skill and mastery in language, we can be denied entry to the layered structures and systems of society.

A critical component of teaching, then, is to *create connections* between a student's Primary Discourses – their unique lived experience, passions and interests, memories, observations, and imagination – and the generally unfamiliar Secondary Discourses we are aiming to equip them with through our teaching. The capital that students bring to the classroom is often under-utilised or treated as peripheral when it should in fact constitute the wellspring for all learning.

In the discussion that follows, I explore this idea of student capital, along with a number of principles and conditions for optimising students' engagement with the 'magic world' of reading.

THE BENEFITS OF READING

We have plenty of research evidence to guide us in our approach to teaching reading in secondary English. Foremost is the understanding that 'reading for pleasure has the most powerful positive impact of any factor on a young person's life chances. So if you want to change their lives, make books and reading central to everything you do. And let them enjoy it' (Kohn, n.d.).

There is a host of cognitive and affective benefits of reading – especially reading fiction for pleasure. Emerging research in neuroscience, for example, points to the far-reaching, positive impact of reading fiction on brain development, personality, Theory of Mind, social and emotional intelligence, and decision-making (Berns, 2022; Zunshine, 2006).

The Centre for Youth Literature (CYL, 2009) reports that from studies of the brain, neuroscience has 'discovered that dynamic activity in the brain continues (beyond the age of six, when the brain is already 95% of its adult size) and the thickening of the thinking part of the brain doesn't peak until around 11 years of age in girls, and 12 in boys' (p. 12). Thus, at the time when students are making the transition from primary to secondary school, the neural pathways and connections that are stimulated will continue to grow, while those that are not will be thwarted:

"[s]o, if 10 to 13-year-olds are not reading for pleasure, they are likely to lose the brain connections; the hard-wiring that would have kept them reading as adults. Reading after this age could become an unnatural chore, affecting young people's ability to study at a tertiary level and perform well in the workplace" (CYL, 2009 pp. 11–12).

The same CYL report (2009) affirms that reading for pleasure:

- supports literacy and learning in school;
- enables young people to develop their own, better informed perspective on life;
- is a safe, inexpensive, pleasurable way to spend time;
- allows young readers to understand and empathise with the lives of those in different situations, times and cultures – to walk in the shoes of others; and
- improves educational outcomes and employment prospects (p. 11).

Other studies, such as those conducted by Organisation of Economic and Co-operation and Development (OECD), establish a clear correlation between the quantity and quality of students' reading for pleasure and their level of achievement in reading assessments. This is especially evident in reading assessments that require higher-order capacities for sustained engagement in 'continuous' texts, interpretation, empathising, speculation, reflection and evaluation (Australian Council of Educational Research [ACER], 2018).

From the Australian report on the *Program for International Student Assessment* (PISA) (ACER, 2018) it is worth dwelling for a moment on the finding that those students who indicated that they read widely and diversely had higher mean scores in PISA than those students who indicated a negative attitude to reading and a lack of breadth and diversity in their reading choices. Impor-

tantly, *regardless of background* and *parental occupational status*, those students who were highly engaged in reading achieved reading scores that were significantly above the OECD average (ACER, 2018).

For educators, parents and carers, the takeaway message from research and reports on programs such as PISA is the critical role we can play in nurturing young people's proclivity to read, including reading for pleasure. Jackie French argues that it is the 'make or break' task of the adult to attentively guide, model and support the development of students' sustained reading engagement, enjoyment and confidence. French insists that success in reading depends on the 'young person + the right book + the adult who can teach them how to find it' (French, 2019, p. 9). This 'winning equation' depends on the oft-neglected variables of individual taste, motivations and purposes for reading. Just as French has no desire 'to read about the sex life of cricketers, any politician who isn't dead, or any [book] with a blurb that includes "the ultimate weapon against mankind [sic]"' (2019, p. 8), so too does each individual student come to reading with their own interests, appetites and antipathies (Manuel, 2012a, 2012b). Or, as Kohn (n.d.) puts it:

"Students will become good readers when they read more.
Students will read more when they enjoy reading.
They will enjoy reading when they enjoy their reading material.
They will enjoy their reading material when they are left to choose it themselves."

These insights affirm what we as English teachers know: that reading widely, regularly and deeply has a profound impact on a student's life chances.

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENT CHOICE

Of course, the realities of syllabus requirements and classroom practice mean that what students read, their purpose for reading, and how they read in our classes (and beyond) is necessarily influenced by teachers' judicious selection of texts and pedagogical choices. This expert curation of reading material and experiences by the teacher does not, however, preclude opportunities for students to exercise some degree of choice in the what, why, how and when of their reading.

Remembering that *choice* is the most critical factor in generating motivation, reading engagement, confidence and achievement, an effective and balanced reading program should provide access to a wide variety of reading materials so all students can experience: whole class or shared reading; small group or pairs reading; and individual reading.

In practice, this means designing a reading program that incorporates four strands.

1. Teacher-selected materials, based on the teacher's understanding and awareness of the students' needs, interests and capacities and the resources available to them.
2. Teacher-student negotiated materials - individuals or groups of students discuss and plan their reading choices and reading goals with the teacher.
3. Student-student negotiated selections - for example, Literature Circles, reading groups and Book Clubs.
4. Student self-selected reading material, as part of a wide reading program.

TIME IS A FRIEND OF READING

We understand from research that 'students cannot become experienced until they actually engage in sustained periods of reading. This can be facilitated only when students are provided time to read and access to books they really can read' (Ivey, 1999, p. 374). Establishing regular, dedicated time in class for reading (by the teacher and by students) is a key ingredient for developing young people's motivation, reading habits and reading accomplishment. Even modest amounts of time allocated to reading – shared reading and individual reading – can yield substantial flow-through rewards, including that vital sense of belonging to a community of readers.

THE POWER OF MODELLING

One of the crucial roles of the teacher when it comes to reading is modelling: modelling reading practices, attitudes, habits and enthusiasm. Through modelling and using whole texts regularly (e.g. stories, poems, plays, articles) rather than fragments of text, the teacher can demonstrate that reading is a process of making meaning, embodied semantics, elixir for the heart and mind, and 'bodybuilding for the brain' (French, 2019, p. 9): reading is far more than merely the application of a series of sub-skills in standardised literacy tests.

The simple act of reading aloud to students can be a

catalyst for a whole range of short- and longer-term benefits that include, but are not limited to:

Language development

- Reading aloud to students helps to improve their language skills, including vocabulary, grammar, and syntax. It exposes them to new words and sentence structures, which they may not have encountered otherwise.

Cognitive development

- Reading aloud helps to develop a student's cognitive skills, including attention, memory, and critical thinking. It also helps to improve their ability to understand and interpret information.

Imagination and creativity

- Reading aloud can stimulate a student's imagination and creativity. It can transport them to new worlds, introduce them to different characters and situations, and encourage them to imagine new horizons.

Emotional development

- Reading aloud can help to develop a student's emotional intelligence by exposing them to different emotions and situations. It can help them to develop empathy and understanding of others' ways of seeing and living in the world.

Relationship building

- Reading aloud can provide an opportunity for shared experience and can contribute to stronger relationships between students and between students and the teacher.

CREATING AN OPTIMAL ENVIRONMENT AND NURTURING A COMMUNITY OF READERS

In an optimal learning environment students feel invested in their learning by actively participating in shaping their own reading practices and experiences. A classroom environment that values and celebrates reading by ensuring it is visible, low-risk and enjoyable serves to bolster students' readiness to engage with reading and other readers and, in turn, experience the social and personal affordances that reading can offer.

Creating an optimal environment means normalising the range and diversity of types of reading in everyday life. It means demystifying the reading process by modelling reading, reading often and understanding that reading is socially mediated. Familiarising students with otherwise unfamiliar texts and unfamiliar ways of reading is an essential component of strengthening each student's reading proficiency and, as a consequence, their receptivity to new textual experiences.

Cultivating a community of readers means encouraging students to become curious, critical thinkers and meaning-makers, honing skills of prediction, anticipation, speculation, interpretation, reflection and evaluation through the shared experience of reading and talking about reading. Strategies that promote students' active engagement with and response to reading include, for example:

- The Four Roles of the Reader (Freebody & Luke, 1990).
- Before reading, during reading and after reading tactics (cf. MyRead, Reading Rockets).
- Reading contracts, reading wish-lists and Literature Circles.
- Dramatic readings, representations and interpretations of texts.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Earlier on, I briefly explored the principle of 'starting with the self' and the importance of getting to know and then utilising students' capital as the basis for learning. Recognising and fostering the literacy and experiential capital of each and every student is a deliberate pedagogical approach that aims to engage students in learning by connecting the known with the new. Often, this approach can be realised through pre-reading/pre-viewing strategies, or what is otherwise referred to as 'getting ready for the text'.

For example, strategies intended to arouse interest in the text, activate prior knowledge and experience and prompt speculation about the text can be as straightforward as using the text's cover, title, images or blurbs to stimulate hypothesising, predicting and anticipation. Students do not require specialist knowledge or discourses to engage in discussion about what the cover or title of a text may suggest about its content and what it may remind them of. They draw on what they already know and understand in order to generate connections between their world and their initial ideas about the potential world of the text.

Other effective pre-reading/pre-viewing strategies include:

- Creating a mystery box filled with items relevant to the ideas, action or characters of the text. Take one item at a time out of the mystery box and invite students to speculate on who it may belong to, what it reminds them of, what historical period it may come from, etc. This not only sparks students' anticipation for the text: it also generates a lively and enjoyable discussion.
- Engaging in role-play, scenarios or dialogue that have relevance to the ideas, themes, characters, or plot of the text.
- Using an extract from the text, have students predict what may occur next, write the next scene, dramatise the scene or poem, discuss what the text may be about, based on the extract, etc.
- Taking a key idea/issue/experience/theme explored in the text and inviting students to brainstorm and discuss their experience and understanding of this idea/issue/experience/theme in their own lives and in the world around them. For example: revenge, compassion, conflict, friendship, or overcoming adversity.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

In a recent conversation, an English teacher shared an experience he had with a student who had just completed the HSC English examination. The student was elated. Why? Not because he had completed his school education in English but because, in his words: 'I'll never have to read another book again'. Unfortunately, this sentiment may be a familiar one to some or many of us. It can certainly prompt us to step back for a moment, to 'look again' (Boomer, 1991) at the principles, conditions and strategies that may help us to shift students' negative attitudes to reading: to refocus on our guiding philosophy and aspirations. What do we want our students to remember about our English classes? What do we hope they will carry for their lifetime, because of our teaching? What will be our legacy?

If, like Margaret Atwood, we believe that 'a word after a word after a word is power', then there can be few greater life-changing and life-giving gifts than the gift of the English teacher in championing, enacting and inspiring a love of reading.

End notes:

* *The first line of the heading is a quote from Margaret Atwood in 2019*

REFERENCES

Atwood, M., (2019) *A word after a word after a word is power* – documentary.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qj8P8yvvLNs (trailer)
Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). (2018). *National PISA Reports 2018*. https://www.acer.org/au/pisa/publications-and-data
Berns, G. (2022). *The Self Delusion: The New Neuroscience of How We Invent and Reinvent.* NY: Hachette Book Group.
Boomer, G. (1991). Closing Address to the Australian Reading Association national conference. Adelaide.
Centre for Youth Literature (2009). *Keeping Young Australians Reading*. Victoria: State Library of Victoria.
Dickenson, D. (2014). *Children and Reading: Literature Review*. Canberra: Australia Council.
Freebody, P., & Luke, A. (1990). Literacies programs: Debates and demands in cultural context. *Prospect: Australian Journal of TESOL*, 5(7), pp. 7-16.
French, J. (2019). The secret friends and deep immersion of a book. *Literacy Learning: The Middle Years*, 27 (2), pp. 7-14.
Gee, J. (1996). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideologies in discourses* (2nd ed.). NY: Routledge Falmer.
Ivey, G. (1999). Reflections on teaching struggling middle school readers. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*. 42 (5), 372-381.
Kohn, A. (n.d.). https://www.alfiekohn.org/
Manuel, J. (2012a). Reading lives: Teenagers' reading practices and preferences. In J. Manuel & S. Brindley (Eds.), *Teenagers and reading: Literary heritages, cultural contexts and contemporary reading practices* (pp. 12-37). South Australia: Wakefield Press/AATE.
Manuel, J. (2012b). Teenagers and reading: Literary heritages, cultural contexts and contemporary reading practices. In J. Manuel & S. Brindley (Eds.) *Teenagers and reading: Literary heritages, cultural contexts and contemporary reading practices* (pp. 1–4). South Australia: Wakefield Press/AATE.
Reading Rockets (n.d.). https://www.readingrockets.org/strategies#:~:text=%E2%80%9CBefore%E2%80%9D%20strategies%20activate%20students',discuss%2C%20and%20respond%20to%20text.
Scholes, R. (1985). *Textual Power: Literary Theory and the Teaching of English.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Zunshine, L. (2006). W*hy We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel*. Ohio: Ohio State University Press.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jacqueline Manuel is Professor of English Education at the University of Sydney, Aust. She co-ordinates and teaches secondary English curriculum in the Master of Teaching (Secondary) program.
Her most recent publications include: International Perspectives on English Teacher Development: From Initial Teacher Education to Highly Accomplished Professional. (Routledge, 2022), co-edited with Goodwyn, Roberts, Scherff, Sawyer, Durrant, and Zancanella.; and Reimagining Shakespeare Education: Teaching and Learning through Collaboration (Cambridge University Press, 2023) co-edited with Liam Semler and Claire Hansen.