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A Reading Strategy for a UK university: Reviewing the literature on reading, literacy and libraries, with particular regard to the HE sector

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Abstract

This paper represents a starting point in an information literacy research project by academic librarians in a UK university. The research project explores ways of enabling and encouraging quality student reading through the development of a University Reading Strategy, a set of best-practice ideas and guidelines drawn from discussions with academics, support staff and librarians.

The purpose of the paper is to review current issues around reading, particularly in the HE sector, in contemporary literature. The literature review is intended to provide a backdrop for the research project, giving benchmark information against which the developing Reading Strategy may be considered.

The literature review considers the UK Government's current agenda for enhancing skills levels throughout the adult population. Economic and social challenges to traditional understandings of autonomous learning in HE are reflected in changes in learning and reading styles, and in the changing use of academic libraries. Alongside this the digital environment, within which most young people are comfortable and competent, continues to change reading habits and demand different information seeking skills. Public and academic libraries have to find ways to survive and grow in the new Web 2.0 world. Academic learning through new modes of reading has to be increasingly recognised.

In spite of these changes the printed book remains a key element in academic library services. Students continue to demand print texts and the textbook market appears to be thriving. This literature review suggests that traditional reading skills remain at the heart of university education, but that new modes and media for reading can be used creatively to enhance student learning.

Keywords

Reading ; reading skills ; Higher education ;

1. Introduction

This literature review marks a stage in one University Library's campaign to develop a strategy in partnership with its parent institution to encourage and enable more and better reading amongst students. Anecdotal feedback from academic colleagues, support staff, and the experience of librarians at enquiry points convinced library staff that student reading skills need attention. At least two levels of skills support are identified – firstly, study skills support in how to approach academic reading, and secondly, support in skills of critiquing and synthesising reading. These skills are a

key element in information literacy and are reflected in the SCONUL seven pillar model of information literacy progression particularly in Stages 4 and 5 – the ability to locate and access information, and the ability to compare and evaluate information obtained from different sources. A University Learning and Teaching Fellowship award enabled senior library staff to embark on a project to develop a University Reading Strategy – a set of best-practice ideas and guidelines designed to encourage and support quality student reading. The literature review provided a starting point for the research, while the research project itself used focus groups with academic staff, students, library and study skills support staff, to collect best practice ideas for encouraging quality reading.

2. Methodology

This literature review was undertaken by academic librarians. Key words and concepts around reading, reading skills, higher education, literacy, libraries, online learning, comprehension, digital texts, and academic achievement were generated and agreed. A date range limitation from 1995 to the present day was adopted as we were concerned mainly with current issues.

A variety of online databases were searched via our University Library's metalib facility including Science Direct, EBSCO resources (Library, Information Science and Technology Abstracts and Professional Development Collection), Emerald and e-journal packages. Library and Information Science Abstracts was also searched. Librarianship journals such as Journal of Librarianship and Information Science, Journal of Information Science, SCONUL Focus and the Journal of Academic Librarianship were scanned. National and local government websites were included for policy documents.

There is a large body of literature concerning reading skills and development in children in schools. This was excluded from the scope of the review because the focus of our work was on students in higher education who are essentially adult readers.

3. UK national context

The wider context of the University Library L&T Fellowship to create a Reading Strategy is a national concern and concentration on adult skills and in particular literacy and reading skills. Universities find themselves in the front line of Government expectations for delivering skills improvements in the UK population.

Following the Leitch Review of Skills (HM Treasury 2006) the UK Government has committed itself by 2020 to targets of 95% of adults with the basic skills of functional literacy and numeracy, and over 40% of adults with Level 4 or above qualifications. Alongside this HE institutions are to be encouraged through directed funding to engage more directly with employers in order to meet the skills needs of the nation.

The Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (2007) sets out its Strategic Objectives from April 2008 onwards to:

Improve the skills of the population throughout their working lives to create a workforce capable of sustaining economic competitiveness, and enable individuals to thrive in the knowledge economy

and to:

Strengthen the capacity, quality and reputation of Further and Higher Education systems and institutions to support national economic and social needs.

Literacy is seen as a key skill in the building of a successful 21st century UK workforce. The National Literacy Trust, an independent charity that works to promote literacy and reading in the UK, has designated 2008 as the National Year of Reading. The aims of the year are to promote and encourage reading so that people appreciate its benefits both for pleasure and purpose.

4. The university and reading

Reading has traditionally been at the heart of academic study and university education. "Reading for a degree" expresses something about the autonomous nature of student learning at university. The knowledge and expertise represented by an academic award implies an ability to make a discipline one's own through a personal engagement with the subject. This type of learning grows through reading and critical thinking.

The pressures of the knowledge economy, the UK's national skills agenda and the funding crises of the UK HE sector are combining to raise serious questions about traditional understandings of university education. In particular, the newer post-1992 universities have to compete for students and research funding in an increasingly competitive environment. Are market forces changing the very essence of academic life?

Ronald Barnett (2000) of the Institute of Education, University London writes that in an age of supercomplexity and radical uncertainty:

University knowledge, understood as a pure, objective reading of the world, does have to be abandoned

But:

.... A new epistemology for the university awaits....an epistemology for living amid uncertainty.

This has 4 elements – firstly, universities should seek to produce new understandings of knowledge through creative work. Secondly, they should grow their capacity:

for critical interrogation of all claimants for knowledge.

Thirdly, universities need to work at enabling individuals to feel at ease in an uncertain world and lastly, students should be encouraged to bring their own critical insights to bear on the knowledge they are offered. In this way Barnett sees the university carving out a new role:

as a site of enlightenment, of critical scrutiny, of the open society, and of personal fulfilment. (Barnett 2000, pp. 420-421)

Barnett represents perhaps an idealistic view of the possibilities of the new, skills driven university agenda. The uncertainty over the future role of academic study, and of the role of the university library within that, has been a driving force behind this research project and its focus on student reading habits. Can reading still maintain its profile within university education?

Amanda Cain, librarian at West Chester University, Pennsylvania writes of the demands that academic reading can make on the student:

Reading demands silence and much time; it is intensely private and individualistic; and outwardly it appears non-productive. In an age when undergraduates are increasingly required to log on to electronic networked environments to have and, more important, report a learning experience, 'deep' reading may even be subversive. (Cain 2002, p.120)

4.1 Supporting reading skills

Our research findings suggest that such "deep reading" may be a rare commodity amongst our students. Many find it difficult to make the transition from school study to university study. The autonomous nature of academic study with little structured guidance from lecturers about how to use self-directed study time poses problems for some new students. Railton and Watson (2005, p.183) suggest that there is a mismatch between tutor and student expectations:

..we may know precisely what we mean when we advise students to 'go and read' , on the other hand such proclamations are in themselves practically useless to new students unless they are accompanied by further explication such as, what to read, how to read it, and what to do with it. These are precisely the kind of academic skills that students are unlikely to have had to utilize in previous modes of education and, contrary to what we seem to hope, do not inherently possess or 'naturally' develop.

They argue that the expectations of university study should be presented to students much more clearly, with support offered to enable students to reach higher levels of critical engagement with their discipline. Beginning from their experience of seminar groups where students sought help from the tutor rather than contributing intellectually to a learning discussion, Railton and Watson experimented with small reading groups of students. The groups were student-led and reading material was supplied each week for them to work on together with instructions on critiquing the material. Discussion boards in the VLE also enabled students to exchange ideas between sessions and allowed tutors to oversee the progress of the discussion. Through this process the students became more independent as learners – the combination of freedom and support provided a creative learning environment:

.. if we continue to cite autonomy as the key marker of 'graduateness' – then it ought to follow that its significance is evident in our own practices. As a priority here, we would argue that autonomous learning should be explicitly conceived as a skill that can be acquired in the same way as other academic

skills and that practices which encourage the development of this skill must be embedded within the learning, teaching and assessment strategy of our degree programmes. (Railton and Watson 2005, p.192)

Others agree that student study habits need to develop to cope with the new academic environment and that students need support from academic staff in order to achieve this development. Hartley (2002) summarises successful traditional approaches to helping students with reading skills. These include asking questions of a text and filling in guide sheets after reading an article with details about the article's content and argument. Many students are able to develop a "strategic" reading style which enables them to use both deep and surface approaches to texts depending on the nature of the task ahead of them. Hartley also recommends paired and group reading exercises, and guided peer questioning on set texts. He also argues that electronic books can aid information retrieval through search facilities within a text, and flexible access to texts for distance learners. (Hartley 2002, pp.212-213)

The continuing increase in the number of international students in UK universities also highlights the importance of putting in place additional support for reading. Students with English as a second language who received strategic reading instruction had significantly higher marks in a study by Dreyer and Nel (2003).

4.2 Research on meta-cognition

Whilst there is an extensive body of research on metacognition and reading comprehension amongst school-aged children, there has been little research carried out on student awareness and use of reading strategies at academic level. A research project by Mokhtari and Reichard (2002) at Oklahoma State University devised an inventory of 30 statements about reading which were administered to a sample of 443 students. The inventory was not designed so much to measure student comprehension capabilities but rather to act as a tool to help students increase their awareness of their own use of reading strategies. Statements range from "I have a purpose in mind when I read" to "I preview the text to see what it's about before reading it" and "I try to guess the meaning of unknown words or phrases". The benefits of use of the inventory are increased responsibility by students for their own learning and improved self-perceptions and motivation.

Another research project by Jackson (2005) at the University of Iowa examined the links between students' component reading skills and their overall level of text comprehension and literacy. This in turn was related to their academic achievement. The 193 student subjects performed a variety of reading tests with uneven results across the research sample. Analysis of the results suggested that:

word decoding and text comprehension are very modestly related among university students. Furthermore, neither word decoding accuracy nor reading fluency is related to overall academic achievement. (Jackson 2005, p. 129)

Jackson suggests that further research is needed on how students with poor component reading skills compensate for these deficiencies; also that, for:

university students, domain and genre-specific reading knowledge and strategies may be the essence of comprehension. (Jackson 2005, p.132)

5. The online environment

The online environment is seen both as an opportunity for and a threat to academic reading. The present generation of 18-25 year old students has grown up in front of television, video games and computer monitors. How much has this affected their ability to engage with academic texts? Research suggests that active learning activities (kinaesthetic learning) can increase student achievement:

..students for the most part retain only about 10% of what they read, but they retain 20-30% of what they see. These figures may account for students' strong preference for visual modes of information seeking. (Weiler 2005, p.49)

A National Literacy Trust survey on the importance of reader self-definition questioned young people from primary and secondary schools in the UK – 1143 defined themselves as “readers” and 471 defined themselves as “non-readers”. 60% of the “readers” read fiction books outside school whereas only 11% of the “non-readers” did so. However, the “non-readers” still read widely outside school – 66% read magazines, 52% read websites, 49% read blogs/networking websites and 43% read emails. Interestingly the survey also discovered that reading is often seen by young people in an unfavourable light. 43.5% of the “non-readers” saw readers as “geeky/a nerd” and 35.5% saw readers as “boring”. The term “reading” appears to be coloured by the types of materials it supposedly encompasses. (Clark and Osborne 2007)

Other research agrees that young people's ease with digital materials in playful and creative situations can offer opportunities for acquiring and developing reading skills. Narrative forms in particular, for example in computer games and virtual reality media, can increase engagement in reading. Young people:

consume and create meaning from a variety of popular media texts. (Ross et al. 2006, p.120)

Rosenblatt, (1978 cited in Evans and Po 2007) wrote of the transaction that occurs between reader and text in the act of reading:

Like a musical score, Rosenblatt wrote, the author creates a score to guide the reader (ie. the author intends meaning) and the reader does more than just obediently follow the score. The reader brings to the score his or her own experiences and draws from these to create a new work of art. (Evans and Po 2007, p. 57)

Working from this theory Evans and Po examine students' responses to literary digital texts in a study at Boston College, USA. Their findings offer some insights into the socio-physical aspects of reading as well as the technical aspects. They found that physical setting is important for reading:

students said again and again that they just could not get comfortable reading on the computer. It was hard on their eyes, they got headaches, and they

couldn't curl up in a comfy chair or lie down in bed or take the computer into the bathtub. (Evans and Po, 2007, p. 62)

The experience of reading a text digitally is quite different to reading a physical one. Levine et al (2007) found that students were more easily distracted when reading online as they tended to have several windows open at once on the computer and check emails, use Messenger etc. intermittently whilst reading.

5.1 Dealing with digital texts

Evans and Po's research required students to read hypertext novels, a digital format which requires the reader to choose and click on links to progress through the story. The subjects struggled with this method, finding it difficult to devise a framework for understanding the text in the traditional way. In a printed novel one is able to go back and revise one's provisional framework of understanding as new information becomes available; with a hypertext novel it is difficult to go back and re-read and revise one's understanding. Alongside this the students found that they had no sense of closure when they finished reading online as there was no sense of achievement, of having finished a book and placed it back on the shelf.

The researchers concluded that these students attempted to engage with digital texts in the same way that they engaged with physical texts and that this had been generally unsuccessful. The pedagogical implications are that teachers need to make students aware of different types of reading being suited to different types of texts. Students already have different stances towards reading Google, Messenger etc. and these need to be highlighted and examined. For students of literature in particular this provides an opportunity to explore more deeply the roles of readers and authors in the reading transaction in digital and physical texts.

Other research on the online academic reading process has examined in detail the way students read and highlight sections of digital text in order to improve comprehension and share understanding with other readers. Qayyum's (2006) research at the University of Toronto explored the interaction between readers and digital reading applications (such as Adobe) which facilitate marking up of texts, to draw out implications for system design. He found that underlining and highlighting are the pre-dominant forms of marking used in e-documents. Underlining is used to emphasise ideas and highlighting is used to indicate keywords. Students reading e-documents are less likely to write annotations on the text than those reading physical texts. A variety of possibilities for orientation (ie horizontal or vertical) of annotations in an e-document needs to be developed. The research also noted that readers like to start reading with a clean copy of the document. However the online environment could offer layers of markings from different readers which could be shared between a group of readers as discussion on a text progresses.

6. UK Public Libraries and reading

An investigation into reading in the UK has to take account of the historical role of public libraries and their current position in national literacy campaigns. Historically, public libraries were dedicated to education and the literary improvement of the general public, and their stock reflected this in its seriousness and classical nature. However, in the later years of the 20th century their main role changed to support popular culture more in the provision of pleasure reading materials and popular fiction. With the advent of the internet and electronic media, usage statistics for public

libraries have fallen substantially and funding crises in local government have meant that new ways of providing and encouraging reading have had to be found. An example is Essex County Libraries' new website: *Ask Chris* (<http://askchris.essexcc.gov.uk>). Aimed at children and adults, the service offers an exciting portal into a mixture of library services including advice on what to read next, information on Reading Groups, a discussion board for book reviews and comments, and a link to the public library catalogue.

Reading fiction as a social activity in Reading Groups or Book Clubs has become very popular. Many people are finding belonging to a Reading Group a satisfying activity:

the sharing of different experiences and perspectives as each person reads the book in the context of her own life; the validation of reading – this is not just a selfish pleasure but a serious obligation – in the face of other people's demands on the reader's time; the exhilaration of debating new and challenging ideas in a comfortable, nonthreatening environment; the replication of the graduate seminar in a more relaxed setting; and the cachet of doing something seen to be 'intelligent'. (Ross et al. 2006, p. 238)

7. Academic libraries and reading

Academic libraries have faced similar challenges to public libraries from the internet, Google and the easy availability of online information. Although to some extent students are a "captive audience", academic libraries too are facing a period of change, re-identifying themselves as centres for learning in the new HE environment.

There has been a rapid acceptance in academic libraries of the importance of electronic sources of information and an increasing respect for the academic credibility of such sources. Online journals have been around now for many years and e-books are beginning to make a significant impact on university library catalogues. The Google generation of students and researchers expect to find information quickly and easily via search engines and screens. Developing students' ability to read and critically evaluate the wealth of material available has become a key role of professional academic librarianship.

Library instruction or user education has changed dramatically over the last 10 years, providing a key element in maintaining the relevance, accessibility and availability of library resources. Information skills training and the broader concept of information literacy learning have become an accepted part of the work of the academic librarian. Research by Barry (1997) concentrates on the range of information skills that doctoral students will need in the new environment:

Academic users in general are not aware of this quantum leap in the need for information skills and information skills training... These are not skills which can be acquired easily en masse or in a short space of time. (Barry 1997, p. 235)

However, the emphasis on skills has changed in the last decade with more intuitive digital resources being developed. Now the focus is on empowering students to

evaluate the information they have retrieved. Reading skills and critical thinking are beginning to take precedence over basic search skills:

Evaluation and effective use of information in any form is impossible without the use of critical thinking.. (Weiler 2004, p. 47)

There is a need for librarians and their academic colleagues to recognise and support a process of student cognitive development which will enable them to make best use of library resources of all types:

....cognitive ability is a developmental process and students must go through a series of steps over a period of time before they are able to seek information critically and reflectively. (Weiler 2004, p. 52)

The innovations of Web 2.0 which allow end-users to create their own web presence in facilities such as Wikipedia, Facebook, YouTube and Second Life, have resulted in further proliferation of accessible information sources. Whilst such facilities may be democratising the web (at least in the rich West) they pose threats to the building of reliable information and scholarly knowledge that have been at the heart of the creation of academic digital libraries in many universities. The skills of the librarian in filtering and selecting material are easily overlooked or bypassed:

Librarians are the Jedi knights of the modern age, committed to reading, interpretation and thinking in a world of ignorance, managerialism and tabloidisation. Like the Jedi, librarians have also been under threat from an evil empire – in this case, capitalism, as schools and universities reduce the budgets for books and staff. The justification for this downsizing is that Google is as good as a catalogue and the web is almost a library. (Brabazon 2007, p. 14)

7.1 Student-friendly libraries

The UK Government's agenda for widening participation in HE has led to an increase in the number of young adults at university. Many of these students are the first in their families to embark on study at HE level and an academic library can seem a daunting prospect. "Library anxiety", a term coined by Mellon in 1986, remains a significant obstacle for some students as they progress through their studies. Those students who have low reading ability and text comprehension skills are likely to suffer most from library anxiety. However, a study by Jiao and Onwuegbuzie (2003) which confirmed this correlation also found that skilled readers suffered from high levels of anxiety, caused by "affective barriers" (feelings of inadequacy while performing or attempting to perform library tasks) and lack of "comfort with the library" (how safe, secure, welcoming and non-threatening the library feels).

Attempts by universities to make their libraries less threatening and more welcoming to students have led to the development of informal study zones within libraries (learning zones), where students can work in groups, use computers or laptops and eat and drink (activities traditionally frowned on in university libraries). The Saltire Centre, at Glasgow Caledonian University has been an outstanding example of this new learning environment.

JISC, the national UK body which supports education and research by promoting innovation in new technologies and by the central support of ICT services, has produced a publication on designing learning spaces:

The publication takes the reader on a 'walk through' an educational institution, exploring the relationship between learning technologies and innovative examples of physical space design at each stage of the journey. Discussion of the key points is illustrated by ten case studies from further and higher education, and floor plans from AMA Alexi Marmot Associates, architects and space planners, which provide up-to-date guidelines on the integration of technologies into teaching and learning accommodation. (JISC 2006)

7.2 Books and reading lists

Yet in spite of the immense growth in digital resources and online learning the book remains a key element in academic library services. Student surveys still highlight frustration with numbers of key texts available on the shelves. "Printed library materials I need for my work" showed in the author's University Library LibQual survey 2007 as being the area where users felt the library service least met their expectations.

Due to increasing numbers of students and limited funding, academic libraries continue to struggle to provide sufficient copies of key texts as well as background reading. Research projects at Cardiff University (Wall and Williams 1999) and University of Wales, Bangor (Sherwood and Lovecy 1997) give details of experiments with short loan collections and variable loan periods in attempts to ease the pressure on key texts that appear on reading lists. Both projects report limited success in producing increased user satisfaction. The University of the West of England Library tackles the difficulty through trying to manage student expectations by changing the approach of academic staff to resource provision. UWE librarians have in consultation with academic staff devised "reading strategies" which lay down guidelines for academic staff on how recommended reading should be promoted. These include recommending electronic books and journals more regularly, getting chapters of books and articles digitised where the CLA licence permits and presenting them in the VLE, asking students to purchase key texts, and placing key texts in the library's Short Loan collection. (Chelin et al, 2005) The critical element in getting such strategies to work effectively is constant open communication between library and academic staff. A further research project by Briddon (2005) which provided all required reading to a cohort of students either electronically or through copyright cleared photocopies, reports that levels of student satisfaction with the library service rose as did the students' awareness of the importance of library resources. However, the project required librarian and module leader to liaise closely. Briddon suggests that the true test of new reading strategies is the impact they have on student learning and increased understanding of their subject. Looking at assignment results would:

provide a much more objective study into the impact of the new reading list approach. (Briddon 2005, p. 7)

Reading lists continue to be both a key component and a source of frustration in the relationship between librarians and their academic colleagues. Martin and Stokes surveyed academic staff to find out what reading lists are for- "What are the

pedagogical and philosophical rationales that underpin them?" Tutors responded that they saw reading lists ideally having a role in:

moving students from dependent to autonomous learners by offering support and guidance. (Martin and Stokes 2006, p. 34)

There was some fear amongst academics of supplying students with too much material and thus spoon-feeding them. Students were also asked about their experience of reading lists. They demonstrated "instrumentalism" in their use of lists, focussing on reading key texts which would contribute to producing the assignment in question. Students also reported the emotional experience of sometimes not being able to access items on their reading lists. The researchers conclude that annotated reading lists could be useful to students giving them not only the bibliographic details but also instructions on how to access and a brief resume of the content. (Martin and Stokes, 2006)

7.3 Textbooks

Many academic staff, particularly in vocational disciplines, continue to recommend key textbooks to students as background readers for their courses. A Publishers Association (2005) survey of over 700 students in various disciplines found that 91% of the students surveyed thought that textbooks were "very important" or "somewhat important" to their learning and understanding of the subject. The survey also found that generally students considered textbooks to be very expensive although they can give value for money, particularly if the book is integrated into the module and the whole book is relevant. A case study on the use of Economics textbooks by Richardson (2004) argues that in this discipline there is:

a peculiar obsession among the lecturing staff with the selection, place and importance of the textbook. At the beginning of lectures the assembled students would be asked, 'Have you done the reading?' The textbook was positioned as central in preparing for and reviewing topics covered in the lectures. In this cultural and disciplinary context, the textbook took on a level of importance and assumed an authority similar to that exercised by devotional texts in the course of religious observance. (Richardson 2004, p. 510)

The researcher notes that levels of plagiarism amongst students on such courses are high and suggests that this is in part due to the fact that they are given this:

fixed canon of content knowledge,

but are then expected to reproduce it in their own words. He concludes:

The evidence from this study would suggest that while introductory textbooks are designed to induct students into various disciplines and their academic literary practices, they may create considerable learning problems for students. There is no reason to believe that this is peculiar to Economics. (Richardson 2004, p. 519)

8. Conclusions

The evidence found in this review of the literature concerning reading, literacy and libraries, in particular in the HE sector, shows a changing environment with new challenges arising and joining traditional challenges, rather than replacing them. Reading is still at the heart of university education but the content, style, media and setting for it are in flux. The evidence suggests that many students who come to university are unprepared for the autonomous nature of academic study. Whereas in the past “deep” reading was expected and assumed, now it must be nurtured, encouraged and enabled, though it appears that new technologies and learning environments can help rather than hinder this process. Reading lists can be seen as part of the scaffolding academics put in place in the process of moving students towards being autonomous learners. The literature suggests that high expectations of student achievement, and creativity and innovation on the part of academic, library and support staff, can continue to inspire student learning through reading and excellence in university education. These insights inform our research project to develop a “Reading Strategy” for our University. They are reflected in the evidence we are collecting from colleagues, and will help to structure our recommendations.

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