

Between Global and Local: Adult Learning and Communities Network

Learning and Living in Diverse Communities



ESREA BGL-ALC – University of Pécs

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Table of Contents

<i>Preface: Living and Learning in Diverse Communities</i>	4
<i>Prof.(H) Dr. Dr. h. c. Heribert Hinzen: Review Note</i>	5
<i>Sam Duncan: “Widening the Ownership of the Word”? – When Adults Read Aloud</i>	8
<i>Éva Farkas: Adult learning is key in the adaptation to the economic and social effects of the fourth industrial revolution</i>	18
<i>Krisztina Fodorné Tóth: Diverse Electronic Learning Support – University Target Groups</i>	28
<i>Marta Gregorčič: Selected Results of the Project Old Guys Say Yes to Community: Targeting Men Aged 60 Years or More</i>	36
<i>Andreas Hejj: Running head: How adult education can foster creativity and cooperation between cultures</i>	49
<i>Juiper Martins de Abreu Júnior, Helen Wanderley do Prado: The Schooling Permanence In Adult Education In Brazil: Reflections On The Proeja Program</i>	60
<i>Jumbo Klercq: Learning To Live Together</i>	69
<i>Inez Zsófia Koller: A laboratory for community learning – the Vision of Tomorrow Workshop series</i>	77
<i>Dr. Zsuzsa Koltai: The Role of Museum Learning in Societal Development</i>	85
<i>Bálint Lente: Hungarian Approaches, Policies and Programs in Adult Education in the Leadership and Organizational Learning context</i>	93
<i>Licínio C. Lima: Adult learning and education in diverse communities: Cultural invasion or dialogical action for liberation? Revisiting Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed</i>	115
<i>Dr. habil Balázs Németh: Bridging Learning Cities to Research on Adult and Lifelong Education</i>	132
<i>Dana Nurmukhanova, Taisia Muzafarova: Schools as Learning Organizations: Overview of Policy Development in Kazakhstan</i>	144
<i>Rola Abu Zeid – O’Neill, Gertrude Cotter: Living in Diverse Communities: Women’s Experiences on Integration and Inclusion in Carrigtwohill and East Cork (Ireland)</i>	162
<i>Éva Szederkényi, Ouijsdane El Arabi: Analysing the Role of Universities in the Development of Learning Cities – a Case Study to Integrate Diverse Adult Learning Communities</i>	173

Sam Duncan¹

“Widening the Ownership of the Word”? – When Adults Read Aloud

Summary

This paper presents an overview of what we can learn from the three strands of the Reading Aloud in Britain Today project: questionnaire, Mass Observation and interviews. The findings suggest the ubiquity and diversity of the everyday adult oral reading practices largely overlooked in academic and educational discussions of reading, including the reading aloud of social media posts, graffiti, recipes, prayers and emails; to share, to memorize, to worship, to help others, to write and to be together. The discussion examines implications for adult literacy research, teaching and policy.

There’s a double dimension, isn’t there? [...] It’s something to do with your body, something to do with your voice, the ownership of the word widens completely and I think there’s something quite mysterious actually.

This is a woman talking about reading, about reading aloud alone and reading aloud with other adults. She is saying something that will be recognisable to most readers of this article, and yet this is not what is usually discussed when we talk about ‘reading’ as educationalists or reading researchers in most of Europe and North America. ‘Reading,’ particularly adult reading, is usually understood to mean silent, individual reading. And much of our reading is indeed silent, but is it all? If we look back to the ancient and medieval worlds, reading was generally understood to be something oral/aural, with reading in silence the exception. Over the past eight-hundred years Europe (and much of the Americas) has seen a shift in the dominant understanding of reading, from something primarily oral to something silent. Scholars differ in when they would pinpoint this shift (from as early as the thirteenth to as late as the nineteenth centuries) but agree on the factors at play: a greater proportion of the population being able to read, greater availability and range of texts to read, shifts in the teaching of reading and shifts in relevant technology such as reading glasses, indoor lighting and books themselves (see for example Cavallo & Chartier, 2003; Eliot & Rose, 2009; Manguel, 1996; Pugh, 1978; Vincent, 2000). However, this picture is not complete unless we realise that adults did read silently in the past, just as adults do read aloud today. Both in the past and in the present, the dominant idea of reading obscures the sheer diversity of practices engaged in by different adults, in different contexts and for different purposes (Duncan, 2015; Elster, 2003).

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So what do we know about whether, when, why and how adults read aloud today? Beyond anecdote, and a few examples within larger ethnographic studies (see for example the Quaker reading aloud practices in Mace, 2012), very little. Much is written about the *benefits* of reading to children (see for example, the recent Gurdon, 2019) and the uses of reading aloud as an educational *tool* (Gibson, 2008; Pergams, Jake-Matthews, & Mohanty, 2018; Westbrook, Sutherland, Oakhill, & Sullivan, 2018), and yet very little has been published on the reading aloud that adults may engage in across different life domains, in different formations and for different purposes. The UK Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded Reading Aloud in Britain Today (RABiT) project (<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/research/projects/reading-aloud-britain-today>) was developed to fill this gap and, taking Britain as its geographical context, it aimed to create the first record and analysis of contemporary adult reading aloud practices, examining the following research questions:

What, when, where, how and why do adults today read aloud or listen to others reading aloud?

What roles do reading aloud practices play in adult lives?

in order to:

- Better understand reading aloud as a contemporary cultural practice;
- Better understand the role of reading aloud in adult lives across different regional, linguistic and faith communities, including, but not exclusively, the domains of family, faith, work, leisure and the arts;
- Examine the wider significance of contemporary adult oral reading practices in relation to current conceptions/discourses of reading, that is, to expand notions of what 'reading' is, means or involves to better include the diversity of contemporary practices.

Methodology

This project is broadly based within New Literacy Studies (NLS) and the ethnography of literacy championed by the work of Brice-Heath (1983, 2012), Brandt (2001) and Street (1984, 2014), where literacy is conceptualized as multiple and evolving social practices embedded within varied social contexts. Our academic or educational understandings of reading and writing are therefore not fixed and rather require continual examinations of the real-life usages within different contexts. This is core to the overall rationale behind the RABiT project. It is also core to its methodology. The NLS perspective is often associated with forms of ethnographic observation, as researchers seek to document everyday uses of literacy. However, as both Baynham (2000) and Mace (1998) have emphasized, if we remember that literacy *practices* involve personal and social meanings within or beneath the observable literacy *events*, we cannot research through observation alone, but must also gather first-person accounts of these meanings. Shove et al (2012), writing not of literacy in particular but of the “dynamics” of social practices more generally, put forward that any social practice consists of three interrelated elements: materials, competences and meanings. I will return to this later, but for now, it is

important to note that this model also stresses the importance of the “meanings” within social practices.

Mirroring this social practice emphasis on the less-observable as well as the more-observable, both the original (1937-1950s) and revived (1981-) Mass Observation projects have been articulated in terms of multiple levels of duality: as both art and politically-aware social science; as both collaborative writing and data generation; and with a focus on both “what people do and what they think about what they do” (Johnes, 2017), the “correspondents” writing as sociologists (observing and recording the practices of others) and also as autobiographers (Kramer, 2014). This drive to collect observations of others’ practices alongside individual accounts of participants’ own (and the meanings and purposes at play) is what I have termed the “Mass Observation ethos” underpinning the three strands of the RABiT research design: questionnaire, Mass Observation directive and interviews.

Crucially, this methodological ethos is not only in keeping with the ‘meanings’ element of social practice theory but also with another key strand of NLS thinking, as emphasized by Street throughout his career (see for example Bloome, Castanheira, Leung, & Rowsell, 2018; Street, 1984, 2014): our research into literacy practices must help us challenge orthodoxies in order to see the unexpected, forgotten or invisible. This idea was also articulated by Sheridan (2017) in relation to Mass Observation: that these individual and no-doubt idiosyncratic Mass Observer accounts have the power to challenge accepted truths. This is crucial if we are truly interested in cultural diversity. ‘Diversity’ has become such a buzzword that it can be difficult to grasp its possible meanings, but certainly one of these meanings is around challenging preconceptions, breaking free of the blindness that comes from habit, and allowing ourselves to see and understand the variety of practice around us.

Resting on these ideas, a 29-item questionnaire was developed, piloted and distributed to adults (in English and Welsh) in the autumn of 2017 (mainly electronically with the option of hard copies) via project partners, community networks and social media across Britain, generating 529 usable responses.ⁱ The Mass Observation directive was written in collaboration with colleagues at the [Mass Observation archive](#) and sent out in the summer of 2017, generating 160 responses (ranging from one paragraph to 8 pages, 96 emailed and the rest posted) by January of 2018ⁱⁱ. Finally, between October 2017 and July 2018 I travelled around Scotland, Wales and England conducting 49 interviews: predominantly individual, with three paired and two groups of three. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.ⁱⁱⁱ For the purposes of this short paper, I am presenting an overview of the questionnaire data based on descriptive statistics with a focus on practices and purposes, followed by an analysis of the Mass Observation and interview data based on inductive thematic coding to identify patterns of practices, purposes and meanings.

A note on the sample

The aim of the project was to gather data from as wide a range of people living in Britain as possible, but of course this was challenging. The 529 questionnaire participants are a

decent representation of the geographical range of Britain, including of the rural-urban mix. For example, the numbers from Scotland, Wales and England mirror the proportions of the overall populations. In terms of ethnicity/cultural heritage, faith and language use, the questionnaire participants over-represent diversity, that is, they are more diverse than the overall population. However, the questionnaire participants are far less diverse in terms of educational background than the wider population (being around three quarters university educated) and do not reflect the gender balance (being also about three quarters female). Similarly, the Mass Observers, a sample managed by the Mass Observation Project at the University of Sussex, are generally considered to be older, more middle class, more southern and more female than the wider population. With this in mind, I aimed to ensure that the interviewees included men and those who had less formal education, and more people from the North of England and Scotland. Additionally, in organizing the interviews, I aimed to include Celtic speakers, such as Scottish Gaelic and Welsh, as well as those using other dialects of English/Scots, such as the Shetland dialect and Jamaican English, and speakers of other languages, such as Arabic, Urdu and Spanish. It is nevertheless important to note that we cannot consider the project participants an accurate representation of the larger British population. We can, however, take them as an indication of the range of practices which are likely to be going on across the country.

Findings

The questionnaire

Practices: 91% of participants report reading something aloud either daily, weekly or monthly and fewer than 3% say they never read anything aloud. What is read aloud is diverse, but with some patterns. Social media posts, newspapers, children's books, recipes & instructions, signs/posters, poetry and religious texts are read aloud by more people, while graffiti and placards at museums are read aloud by fewer people and less often. For example, almost all participants report at least occasional reading aloud of instructions or recipes aloud and 22% reporting daily and 38% reporting frequent reading aloud of social media posts. 20% of respondents say they read emails and letters aloud on a daily basis and 23% report reading children's books out loud every day.

Purposes: Participants were invited to select reasons why they read aloud (and were able to select as many as apply to them): 89% said they read aloud "to share what I have read with someone", 72% "to read to a child", 71% "to memorize or learn something", 68% "to understand difficult text", 67% "to entertain others", 61% "to help someone," 60% "to help me write something," 56% "because I enjoy it," 55% "to help me read/learn another language," 32% "part of communal religious worship" and 26% for "individual worship/spiritual purposes." However, before seeing these eleven options, respondents were asked to write free text on why they read aloud. 397 participants did so, with versions of "to better understand a text" the most common response (84) and with 80 people writing something similar to "sharing the text," and others noting pleasures of hearing and saying words. Please see Duncan & Freeman (2019) for a longer analysis of the questionnaire data.

Mass observation

The Mass Observation responses, in common with all Mass Observation research (see Moor and Uprichard (2014) on the “unwieldy materiality” of Mass Observation data) present an overwhelming outpouring of opinions, experiences, thoughts and stories about reading aloud. Yet what they share is striking: a united expression of surprise at being asked about adult reading aloud (with one person considering it “one of the strangest directives” and another noting “adults and reading aloud don’t go together”) alongside a realisation of the amount of previously unnoticed reading aloud in their lives: “my first reaction – I don’t do it. But the more I thought about it, the more I realised I do actually read out loud, more than I thought I did” or I imagine like other people, I had thought very little about reading aloud [...] It was something I immediately associated with childhood. However, the more I’ve thought about it, I’ve realised that I read aloud or am read aloud to in a variety of ways.

In keeping with the questionnaire data, the Mass Observers present a wide range of reading aloud practices and purposes, but with recognisable communalities forming twenty categories or groupings of practices: memories from childhood and youth; generic work practices; specific work activities; study purposes; individual and group writing processes; sharing correspondence; following instructions, recipes or reading ingredients; preparing and giving speeches; board games, quizzes and crosswords; play-reading, drama and amateur dramatics; engagement with poetry; religious worship; to help others (including a husband who reads aloud to relieve his wife’s constipation); reading books or stories to other adults; listening to audiobooks; engagement with social media and the news; and miscellaneous solitary practices (including throat exercises). For a more detailed analysis of these practices, please see Duncan (2018) but here it is worth emphasising three findings. Firstly, amongst the Mass Observation correspondents, the reading aloud of social media and newspapers (a less talked about practice in our wider cultural discourses) was more commonly reported than reading aloud to children (a far higher profile practice). Secondly, a great deal of the reading aloud of books and poetry for pleasure was done by one adult to another adult, rather than with children. Finally, people write about reading aloud when completely alone (and with pets), for practical purposes such as writing or understanding instructions as well as to do with pleasures and rituals of saying and hearing words. Interestingly, while one person notes that they do not read aloud much because they live alone, two others explain that they read aloud a great deal precisely because they live alone and in this solitude they need to use and hear their voices.

Meanings: remembering that Mass Observers also write as auto-biographers, telling the stories of their lives, it is interesting to note that the majority of the stories told concern forms of ‘being with others.’ Here are three examples. A young woman describes being together in as a community, attending church each week, where “your voice gets lost in a mass of other people [...] It makes me feel like I belong.” Another person tells a story of being with a friend:

My dying friend, bed-ridden and no longer able to go outside, particularly enjoyed listening to poems about nature and the seaside. It made her feel nostalgic and she imagined herself walking along a beach with sand between her toes.

And an elderly man writes of togetherness with the more distant, remembering something that happened to him when he was young:

I chanced one evening to accidentally receive Radio Cairo which was broadcasting, in Arabic I suppose, an extremely long reading [...] by a man whose voice and style were so intense and passionate, that I was mesmerized by it all, and was compelled to listen. I didn't understand any of it, but recognised that some sentences were from time to time repeated as in an heroic poem. The passion and intensity of the reading increased to an extreme degree as the reading continued until, abruptly it ended [...] as if the reader had been shot dead. I sat stunned: its emotional effect was enormous although I understood not a word. I remember it even now, more than half a century later, and can still hear that reader's passionate voice – it still has an effect upon me.

The interviews

The variety of practices and purposes raised in the interviews echo those noted in the questionnaire and Mass Observation responses, for example, reading aloud for individual study and composition purposes; reading aloud to help others at work or in the community; to share texts or entertain; reading aloud as part of individual and communal worship; and reading aloud as engagement with literature and poetry, alone or with others. In common with the survey and Mass Observation data, participants spoke of reading aloud in languages other than English: languages that they use in everyday conversation, languages they use only for religious workshop and languages they value or enjoy through experiencing poetry and literature. In addition, the dialogic nature of the interviews allowed the capture of more detailed explorations. Here, I would like to invite readers to think about the relationships between purposes and meanings in these three conversations, as these interview participants analyse their own practices.

“Reinforcement”

A: If my partner's driving and he has messages, I'll read them back to him [...] I'll get them mixed up, mind [...] in supermarkets I tend to read aloud [...] reading ingredients and stuff [...] you see a lot of people doing it [...]

B: You do see people in the supermarket doing it a lot [...] I do it for clarification that there's no wheat in it, it sounds silly, but in my head it makes sense and if I read it aloud, and I've read every word, and I've spoke every word, then it means that's not in it, if I haven't seen wheat in it, or gluten, then that's not in it.

A: I think it's back to, same as revision, reading aloud enforces it for me -

B: Enforces that thing. And recipes - I find if I do a recipe on my phone or on my tablet, I find myself talking to the tablet, relaying the information, 'right, now I'll do that now, I'll do that now' – and I'm relaying the information as a reinforcement that I'm doing it right, and putting the right things in at the right time and the right amount.

“A time to be together”

C: I had a recent experience where my partner was not well and it sort of, it ended up being, not quite for medicinal purposes, but ‘lie down and I’ll read you a story’ and it brought back, not quite memories [...] I was reading a novel, so, but that quiet, calm, someone not well, it was soothing, it was lovely, it was just a time to be together, it was a time to be calm [...] It was quite a big emotional moment actually where the engagement of one reader and one listener was – a dead interesting thing.

D: And what gave you the idea to read to your partner?

C: He felt poorly, and I thought, actually it would be good – lie down, in bed, and so I’ll read you a story, the idea came from just lying down in bed and I thought, well I’m here [...] instead of me chatting [...] he was tired and he was poorly and he just needed quiet time and I thought well that might sort of help to make you feel better – you’ve got nothing to do apart from listen – you don’t need to respond – you don’t need to acknowledge anything, just lie down and listen and it will be nice. [...] it was an afternoon of ‘let’s just calm down’ – the whole thing took probably about 4 and a half hours but it – it just, it flew in and afterwards we thought ‘wow.’ We talk about it now, but wow.

The “alive” “mystery”

E: I would read out loud in our chapel because we have our own worship so there will be readings out loud in chapel [...] so out loud is quite an important thing for the rest of the community and the public to hear. [...] In my own prayer life too, I will frequently read aloud, poetry for example, because I like to hear the resonance of sound, and expression and it becomes much more alive for me.

F: The fact that the words on the page are being verbalised it gives them a different, a different resonance, it gives them a different meaning [...] you know when I’m in class and I’m reading the, you know, the phrase that I really wanted to, it’s like ‘oh yeah ok I really understand that differently now’ [...] there’s a different resonance, there’s a different feeling to it, there’s a different, it’s almost like a play, like, it’s like ‘ok I can accent this word I this way,’ or I can put this emotion on this word, or I can feel text in a different way [...]

E: There’s a double dimension, isn’t there? I would agree with you what you are saying. It’s something to do with your body, something to do with your voice, the ownership of the word widens completely, and I think there’s something quite mysterious actually.

Discussion & conclusion

Even this brief look at the data tells us that reading aloud, for these participants at least, is indeed a regular adult practice. We could say that it is a common practice, not necessarily something that most people do most days, but something that most people do at least sometimes and that some people do every day. We can also stop and notice that many of the above reading aloud practices are rarely talked about; they do not conform to the current adult policy/research/teaching orthodoxies of silent, individual, instrumental reading. We can observe that it was only through trying to find research

approaches which allow us to get beneath or behind ‘accepted truths’ that we can access this sort of genuine diversity.

The reading aloud practices raised and discussed are indeed diverse. Reading aloud medical notes or letters with a patient to present and clarify a medical history or process is different from reading (or reciting) a holy text out loud in an ancient language only used for worship, in unison with a hundred people, and reading aloud crossword clues across a café table with a family member as part of a weekly meeting is different from reading aloud to draft and refine song lyrics as part of a composition process. If we return to Shove et al.’s (2012) framework for the dynamics of social practices (competences, materials and meanings), we can see how the personal, communal, spiritual ‘meanings’ of reading aloud in unison in a church, combined with the ‘materials’ which may include the multitude of voices, the organ and the acoustics of the building, relate to the particular competences required for (and developed by) this particular reading practice. In other words, the meaning and materials have a relationship with the skills and knowledge needed to do this particular type of reading ‘well.’ The particular grouping of skills and knowledge may be quite different from those involved in reading aloud medical notes with a patient precisely because the meanings and materials involved in these practices are different. What it means to be a ‘good’ reader is something (a little or a lot) different in each case. It is not the ‘same old reading’ simply happening in different contexts. This is an area for more detailed examination elsewhere but for now it may be enough to acknowledge that Shove et al.’s (2012) framework allows us to articulate the fact that different reading practices can involve quite different competences, and while we should not underestimate these differences, and there is still the potential to ‘transfer’ between them because some elements of the competences (or meanings or materials) will be the same or similar.

This is not only about how we understand or conceptualize diverse practices, but this has implications for how we teach reading/literacy and organize literacy policy. The ‘what’ of reading (what reading means, what reading includes) must be broad enough to include all these reading practices, and more, and needs to include explicit reference to the shifting groupings of competences, meanings and materials. Adult literacy learners must be encouraged to understand the breadth of reading and writing, that different literacy practices require different competences and that the competences we may learn taking part in one practice (in a Mosque for example) may still be able, with careful thought, to support the competences we need for another (for example, a workplace practice). There is no point in us talking about welcoming diversity if we are basing our teaching and policy on a narrow and unshifting view of reading which discounts what many people do and value across their lives. Borrowing phrasing from the multilingual, septuagenarian nun who spoke about the “out loud” “widening the ownership of the word,” we need to “widen the ownership” of literacy education.

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