

Reading Aloud in Britain Today (RABiT)

Discussion, reflection and next steps

With a focus on poetry

Reading Aloud in Britain Today (RABiT) is a two-year project researching whether, what, where, how and why adults read aloud. Findings so far tell us that most adults read *something* out loud (and listen to others reading) at least *sometimes*. Very few people never do this. What we read aloud is diverse, including newspapers, social media, books, religious texts, graffiti, recipes, poems, instructions, posters, children's books and crossword clues. Our reasons are equally diverse, including to share, entertain, inform, help, be together, worship, enjoy, memorize, learn, understand and write. Some people read to other adults, some to children, some to pets and some people read aloud when completely alone. Some of this reading we notice; some we may do regularly but rarely notice. Some people read out loud in different languages, including languages we may not use in conversation with others. Forms of reading aloud are important in many workplaces, as well as within family and community relationships, for learning and as part of religious practice.

Points for reflection and action based on a discussion event at the Scottish Poetry Library in February 2019 in collaboration with the poet Vahni Capildeo

About poetry specifically

- Is a poem an oral/aural 'thing' (that can later be 'recorded' with written words on a page)? Or is a poem a written text (that then becomes something else when it is read, either silently or aloud)?
- When creating a poem, do we start from sounds, from meanings or from the look of written words?
- When creating a poem, are visual, non-verbal images part of the mix from the start, or do they come in later? Do the visual and the sound aspects of a poem have to 'fit in' to each other? Is there a process of mutual enhancement, or even inter-semiotic translation, between image and sound?
- What are the differences between reading a poem silently, reading it out loud, reciting it, chanting it, singing it? Reading with one voice? With many?
- Do we consider a poem in terms of its *composition*, as 'arriving' or being created as sounds or rhythms, or as a voice with a particular origin (gender, region etc.)? Or do we consider a poem as *performance*, where it is not a singular thing 'to get right' but rather exists only as experienced by readers/listeners? What difference does this make?
- And what if we consider more carefully accent, dialect and different languages and their relationship to sounds and structures in composition, performance, reading and listening? For empathy with or mockery of others? And for expression of or experimentation with shifting identities?

- How does this relate to literary, poetic, religious and musical traditions?

About reading aloud more broadly

- When we read aloud something we have not written ourselves, to what extent are our uses of voice and body enacting, opening, displaying, enforcing a particular meaning or interpretation of the words? And is this desirable? And what does this say about the potential relationships between writer, reader and listener, or about how the making of meaning is shared?
- What is the nature of the service the reader does for the listener?
- What difference does the human voice make in acts of reading aloud? We considered the voice in terms of identity, physicality, humanity; as a mode of multi-modal communication, a gift given or shared, an exposure, something raw, a form of togetherness.
- When we read aloud are we *giving our voice* to someone or something else, or *taking on* the voice of someone else? Is there a third thing, a 'voice of the poem or text'?
- How do the sounds, rhythms or structures of language affect our accessing of meanings?
- We also discussed the negatives: reading aloud can be used to mock the words of others, and we can be mocked as we read aloud.

What do you think?

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Hand-out by Vahni Capildeo and Sam Duncan, 2019