Changing English Special Issue, Reading Aloud, March 2020

Editorial, Sam Duncan (accepted version)

A few years ago I started a project that involved travelling around Scotland, Wales and England, talking to as many people as possible about when, where, how and why they might read out loud rather than in silence. This project, the AHRC-funded Reading Aloud in Britain Today (RABiT), allowed me to go to places I had never been, hear things I had never heard and meet people I would otherwise probably never have met. It also meant I could work with others to create the first ever record of contemporary adult reading aloud practices across Britain.

As an adult literacy teacher, and then as a teacher educator and researcher, I had noticed how some adults want to develop forms of reading out loud, for example to read as a family or in church, and yet the 'reading' that usually appears in adult literacy curricular documents or assessments is something silent and individual. This begs all sorts of questions: do adults really not read aloud? Is oral reading not 'real reading' or not part of 'proper' adult lives? Does some reading – perhaps of religious texts in languages we do not use for conversations, of poetry shouted at the wind, or snippets of online news shared across the breakfast table – not 'count' as reading?

I had also been fascinated by the idea that in the past 'reading' meant oral reading, with silent reading as the exception, the version that needed specifying, in neat contrast to today where (in many contexts) 'reading' signifies silent reading, with oral reading as the oddity, the 'doesn't quite count,' or, even more intriguingly, the invisible, inaudible, unnoticed. That there have probably been many different forms of reading (aloud and silent) in use concurrently for as long as people have been reading, just as there are many different forms of reading going on today, makes this more interesting – and more telling. If some reading practices are less visible, less noticed or less talked about than others, then what do we really know of the reading going on all around us? And what could we learn from paying closer attention?

When I looked for books or articles on reading out loud, I found some studies of reading aloud as a teaching tool, a great deal on how adults should read to children, and a few recent books arguing for the therapeutic benefits of reading aloud. Yet there was (there is) almost nothing on the extraordinary range of oral reading practices that go on across different domains of adult life, for multiple purposes and with diverse pleasures – practices that are enacted by people as members of communities, in families, with friends and completely alone.

This is what I was trying to do scurrying around the country — to create this record, so that if anyone ever wants to understand reading in early 21st century Britain, they would be able to find out more than which texts we buy, check out or download: they would gather a sense of whether we read these texts silently or out loud, whispered or shouted, chanted or sung, decoded from written symbols or recalled from memory, completely alone in the middle of a supermarket aisle, with a friend on a park bench, or in unison with a group of six-hundred people. I collected memories and voices in Tamil and Welsh, Gaelic, Spanish and Arabic (as well as varieties of English and other languages), accounts and examples of reading aloud to relieve the pain of a dying friend or to remember lines of recipe while cooking, reading aloud

to write songs, understand poetry, worship God, take in graffiti on a toilet door, build furniture and share news.

This project was never about trying to advocate for any particular type of reading or to say that anyone *should* read out loud. It was, rather, simply an attempt to find out what different adults across Britain, of all ages and backgrounds, already do and why. It was, at least in part, so that those of us who teach reading are pushed to think a bit more about the 'reading' that we are trying to teach: what it is or involves for different people. It was a call to broaden our very conceptualisations of reading, so that reading is not something small or narrow but rather something huge, deep and fuzzy-edged, tussling at its boundaries with forms of storytelling and recitation, declaration, proclamation and incantation. It was about trying to rethink the varied possible relationships between literacy and oracy: between words and flesh, individual and communal, public and private, the printed and the voiced.

This special issue (and the November 2018 symposium out of which it grew) is an important part of this aim, this time a gathering of research related to reading aloud, communal and 'everyday' reading, as well as relationships between literacy and oracy, both in and out of the classroom. I am aware that many readers of *Changing English* work and think in contexts where 'reading' is already something broad, deep and mysterious. And yet this is also part of the point – couldn't and shouldn't all of us with interests in understanding, teaching or researching reading get together more to exchange our thoughts and questions? This is the second challenge that this project, and special issue, have highlighted (the first challenge being broadening the narrow conceptualisations of reading that dominate at least some reading research and teaching contexts). There are not enough occasions where those working in adult literacy are together in a room with those working in school literacy or language arts, or with poets, literary critics or reading historians, despite all that we share. This special issue is such a room or gathering, as well as a call for future meetings.

Greg Brooks examines the uses Shakespeare made of 'the oral residue' in Tudor literature, that is, the variety of reading aloud practices that were still common, despite the increased dominance of silent reading. Brooks' analysis highlights the choices available – both to Tudor readers and therefore to Shakespeare in his uses of dramatic devices – between forms of silent and oral reading, and in particular the option of reading aloud when entirely alone. Victoria Watkins also provides (amongst other things) an examination of choices but this time within the shared reading core to the 'Reading Partners' initiative at a London school. As in Brooks, reading aloud is a choice available, and for these Reading Partners, something that becomes a part of the development of both relationships and reading identities. Also looking at a form of shared reading, but this time of poetry read and discussed communally by a group of adults, Susan Jones and Kevin Harvey present us with collaborative meaning-making that is another (though distinct) shared negotiation of choices, and the 'spaces' this can create.

Jack Pugh takes on poetry and collective reading too, but from within the secondary school English classroom, raising questions around what it means for poetry to be embodied or political and how we can understand the role of the artist alongside the choices or possibilities available to the reader, asking crucial questions about who or what we can be, see or understand through poetry. Coming at the classroom from the perspective of teacher education, Slay & Morton explore their work with elementary school pre-service teachers, using 'read-alouds' 'in and as teaching' to develop culturally diverse and inclusive reading

and writing pedagogies. Like Pugh's, this piece asks important questions about forms of identity and their relationship to literacy practices.

Based on her historical research using Victorian fiction, Maxine Burton provides an examination of what the novels of Dickens and Hardy can tell us about the literacy practices of the time. Burton's work provides a timely reminder of just how slippery, complex and relative terms like 'literacy', 'literate' and 'illiterate' are (not to mention 'read' and 'reading'), how bound-up ideas about literacy are with social hierarchies, and what we could see as the quiet dominance of oral reading in how these Victorians lived with and in relation to one another.

Bringing us back into the classroom, but a very different sort of classroom, Lorena Sánchez Tyson looks at the Spanish-language adult basic education programmes offered by the Mexican government within the US, exploring how learners bring their community oral reading (and oracy) practices into the classroom, as well as how teachers use oral reading as a teaching tool. Like Burton's contribution, this is a look at literacy and oracy in the context of community practices; here, though, the focus is on how 'outside' communities are brought into the 'inside' community of the adult education classroom. Jenny Hartley also presents us with the striking 'outside in' Prison Reading Groups, examining the ways these groups work and what they do within places of such vulnerability and pain. Hartley, like Harvey and Jones, looks at the power of communal discussion of literary texts, but also at what is gained specifically through uses of reading aloud and the humanizing power of 'taking some words for a walk'.

In our final article, Gordon Wells takes us to the Outer Hebrides and into a different perspective on relationships between literacy and oracy. Starting with potential tensions in 'value or status' between 'community members' (and their predominantly oral uses of Gaelic) and 'language professionals, activists or academics' (and their literacy-based claims on Gaelic) and moving onto how forms of oral and written language come together creatively in his *Island Voices – Guthan nan Eilean* documentary project (https://guthan.wordpress.com/), Wells invites us to rethink the differences between the written and the oral. He reminds us that a 'REvaluation' of the oral need not be a 'DEvaluation of the written.' This final article – a printed version of a text originally written to be read aloud as a presentation to a listening audience, a text therefore first written to be voiced and then later readjusted to be read (silently?) rather than listened to – also reminds us of the third challenge this special issue has highlighted. How can the written form of an article, editorial or book express the 'what else' or 'what different-ness' [or call this specific affordances?] of reading aloud? How can words on paper or screen contain that which we are arguing voice adds, ear captures and body enacts? This challenge is made explicit by Wells, but we can also read each of the other pieces with an eye (or ear) for how this struggle plays out.

Every one of these articles demands that we ask questions about text and voice: what reading is or can be, whether forms of shared experience, relationships between people and texts, words and bodies or the spoken and the written. They also all say something about choices and possibilities, about identities and allegiances. Yet to try to put them all together, to sum up neatly, risks missing the point that each of these articles can help us see reading, oracy and literacy in quite a different way. Each offers a challenge to dominant or habitualised ways of seeing, a little act of defamiliarising rebellion. Each of these articles is a call to broaden how we think about reading across different contexts, including writing, research and teaching. In

distinct ways, each asks that we allow the breadth of everyday reading practices to expand the conceptualizations of reading that underpin research and teaching.

I'm very grateful that these writers have opened out the aims of RABiT in this way and hope that we can continue working together, moving across contexts: adult literacy, secondary school English, elementary school teacher education, Prison Reading Groups, *Island Voices*, historical literary research, adult shared reading and more. We hope that readers will join us in thinking about other questions we could ask, other ways we could understand what each of us are doing when we read.

Reading Aloud in Britain Today project webpages:
https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/research/projects/reading-aloud-britain-today

To listen to people reading aloud and talking about reading aloud, please see the project sound archives: 91 recordings in the British Library Sound Archive, shelfmark C1765.

To read the Mass Observers 160 pieces of writing about their experiences and memories of reading aloud, please visit the Mass Observation Project archives, Directive 109: Summer 2017 Reading Aloud.

See also:

Duncan, S & Freeman M (2019) *Adults reading aloud: a survey of contemporary practices in Britain*. British Journal of Educational Studies, 1-27.

Duncan, S (2018) *Lend me your ears: Mass Observing contemporary adult reading aloud practices.* Changing English, 25(4), 410-425.

A book, *Oral Literacies: When Adults Read Aloud*, is due to be published by Routledge as part of their Literacies series in 2021.

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