Logging on: Learning to read in a Great Books course

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Abstract

This paper explores the use of log-books in a Great Books literary studies course. It categorises and explores student work using a number of conceptual frameworks from the research literature on learning. Although the learning research is illuminative, the paper concludes that the nature of the student work cannot be fully understood in the absence of the discipline's own elaboration of its pedagogy.

This paper describes a particular assessment initiative that was recently introduced into a first-year undergraduate course of some six years standing, in the School of Arts, Media and Culture at Griffith University. It offers some reflections on this initiative in the wake of its first use earlier this year, explaining its conception, design, implementation and immediate outcomes, and using samples of the students' work to illuminate some of the issues for teaching and learning to which it seemed to give rise.

The course is called Great Books in deference to David Denby's book of that name (Denby, 1997), which partly inspired it, and is a deliberate experiment in "Great Books pedagogy". It stands consciously in the tradition that commenced at Columbia University in the 1920s and reached its zenith at the University of Chicago in the 1940s.

The aims of the present Great Books course could be summed up as follows:

- To increase the students' cultural capital, by which was meant their "ownership" of a certain number of classic works of world literature; and
- To develop their ability to understand and appreciate such works, both in their original historical contexts and in terms of their relevance to the students' own lives.

Clearly, the imaginative ownership of certain undisputed literary classics has potentially life-changing effects for individuals – personally, socially and professionally – and it was always a temptation to let the matter rest there, with the fact of *having read* certain books. The hope, inspired by centuries of tradition, was that they would have read them in a way that would make them stick, thereby stocking their minds with valuable "equipment for living" and perhaps materially improving their vocational prospects. Being realistic, however, one had to recognise that in the early 21st century, chances were that students were not automatically going to bring quite the attentiveness or the competence to their reading that might offer these kinds of outcomes. Their prior experience of relating to literature might have been more ideological than literary (via so-called theoretical approaches at high school); and any prior impulse to read classic literature swamped by the ready availability of the video.

One of the issues in course design, then, was the question of how students might be given practice in reading texts which were complex, often quite long, and unfamiliar. The need was to lead students to engage with the text in an attentive, responsive way, remaining open to a complex experience and the possibility of aesthetic pleasure. In principle, various strategies suggested themselves – reading groups meeting around sections; the "reading around the class" beloved of earlier classrooms; pop quizzes on significant micro aspects, etc. In the event, the course team decided to use reading logs or journals, and to make them an assessable item.

It is important to indicate how it was anticipated that students would use these logs. The idea was that they would make entries in their logbooks continually as they read. The process by which elements would be selected for comment was deliberately left vague (as in "Whatever occurs to you"), apart from providing a few generic examples, such as "How you feel about the hero at this point in the story"; "Whether you like or dislike a particular piece of description"; "Where, when or why the story seems to bog down/liven up"; or simply "What is going on here?". Generic examples of a slightly more reflective and constructive kind were offered as well, such as "Where, and in what context, a given image or concept may have occurred earlier in the same book"; or "What other stories, or fictional characters, or books, or real events, or real people you are reminded of at this point".

It was expected, therefore, that the logs would take the form of unconnected points; there was no pressure on students to produce connected prose at or beyond the paragraph level. The focus was on the activity of reading. The idea was that students would enter the activity with the intention of reading in a more text-conscious way, and indeed a more self-conscious and self-monitoring way, than they would normally do; and that they would be continually taking note of particular elements of the text as they read, and registering the effects of these on their moment-by-moment response. The prompts suggested stopped well short of an exhaustive list, and made no attempt to prescribe a method as such, on the model of, say, the French explication de texte, or a theoreticallyderived "reader-centred" approach. The aim was simply a heightened attentiveness to text, context and self during the extended activity of reading, with the hope that this in turn might begin to generate higher-level perceptions of verbal and formal patterns, emotional rhythms, tonal ambivalences and structural ironies. These perceptions (of real value in and of themselves), would form the essential basis for the final examination, in which coherent answers to questions of a thematic and comparative nature would be expected.

In educational terms, the log-keeping might be seen as a kind of practice. Within most disciplines, there are baseline capacities which students need to form in themselves early in their learning. We ask students to practise them until they are second nature – they are moves or procedures, ways of saying, ways of doing things, which are anchored deeply in the way the discipline constructs knowledge. Learning research (Bain, 1994; Biggs, 2003) has recognised the necessity of such "practice" activities for students, but has also warned of the enormous risk posed by practice which is too procedural, which gets separated from the understanding that has generated it. Practice should therefore build in complexity in order to challenge understanding.

But the application of this idea in this context is not straightforward. In Great Books, the thing that has to be practised (and that for many is almost a new activity) is reading, but more specifically, reading literature, and non-contemporary literature at that. Students need to practise attentiveness and responsiveness to all of the elements of the text, to see where it is multi-layered, to be aware of imagery, convention, allusion, to recognise heightened language, irony. But although the challenge ultimately is to make sense of plots and characters in worlds that are unfamiliar, part of that challenge here is precisely *not* to foreclose too quickly, too easily; not to jump prematurely to "the meaning". The literary experience is one of particularity, rather than one of reductionism.

Accordingly, the log-books were intended to provide practice for the students at opening themselves to the text. And in a way that seems almost deliberately to set aside the imperative of "challenging practice", there was, explicitly, no pressure to make sense of the text as a whole. For some students, this clearly began to happen with reading; for others, their "raw material" remained raw, beginning to come together, if at all, only in the context of other pedagogic activities such as tutorials, essays and examinations. Given this, the question that is of interest is the extent to which the logbooks reveal different ways of reading and/or different ways of selecting material for logging. Hard on

the heels of this, there are also pedagogical questions: Is this useful practice for beginning students of literature? Does it offer the right kind of challenge? Could it be improved by different instructions?

The study

The exploration focused on a random selection of 15 logbooks, of which eight were considered in greater detail. Students had been required to look at all five of the course texts: *The Odyssey, Beowulf, The Canterbury Tales, Macbeth and Gulliver's Travels.*Although the expectation was that the logs would have been produced under the conditions suggested to the students (that is, within the timeframe of their reading of the text), there is no way of confirming that this was the case. Both the larger and the smaller samples represented a range of length (between four and ten pages, some word-processed, some hand-written); of type (prose or dot point; in some cases, tabular); and of formality (some highly colloquial, others not). Although there was great consistency of strategy within some scripts, there was inconsistency in others. It makes sense, therefore, to begin by looking at the different *categories* of reading experience that seem to be displayed here, sometimes within the one script, rather than by analysing scripts individually.

The following categories are put forward tentatively. They describe sequences of entries and have been developed in a series of interpretive iterations between the two authors and the whole texts. If we take the entries at face value, we are assuming that they represent at the very least a minimal process of selection and a concomitant, if momentary, focusing of consciousness. It is hard to exemplify these categories economically since they accrue their identity over rather longer sequences, but instances of characteristic entries have been provided in each case. In most cases, points were anchored to detailed line or page number references; these have been omitted.

1. Rich/open

In this category, the selection of points is wide-ranging and rich. Content includes plot action, text features, character development, depiction of emotion, emergence of issues. Entries include facts, questions, comments, judgments, aesthetic and emotional responses. There is comfortable reference to textual features. Although particular choices for logging are sensitive and unconventional, there is no evidence of the selections being determined by a developing sense of the text as a whole. Textual features are noted and appreciated, but not particularly connected.

(Beowulf) Admittedly the sudden shift from defending his people to securing the gold for them is a little strange... Last "keenest for fame" – A worldliness that Beowulf didn't show much of during the poem... While I don't feel so engaged with the story as is the case with many other books, I love the themes and the way the pages at times seem to be almost dripping with emotion... (L)

(The Odyssey) Boys playing ancient day "hacky-sack" – the books read as though the author was a witness and that the story is therefore believable and valid. It makes me forget that it is "make-believe" and really mythology. Makes it all sound like these were real events and people... Great description that makes me like the book more: "A people who know nothing of the sea and never use salt with their food"... (G)

2. Rich/constructive

In this category, the selection of points is also wide-ranging and rich, particularly in the beginning. It begins, however, to be more selective, geared to connections, patterns, internal relationships, in a way which suggests active interpretation, active making-meaning-of-the-text-as-a-whole. There are fewer questions, perhaps a sign that the

developing interpretation takes precedence over any awareness of ambiguity or confusion. There is less noting of textual features, but where they are noted, they are selected for their reinforcement of the "reading" that is emerging.

(Macbeth) Macbeth recognises, somewhat, the danger of his Lady's character in a woman... he wants to speak to his friend; he is quite troubled and knows he can't tell this to Lady Macbeth... this is the worst moment in Macbeth's life, and Lady Macbeth mocks... the marriage is breaking; now Macbeth has murdered, he needs not Lady Macbeth to harden him to it... while Macbeth has been hardened, Lady Macbeth has succumbed to her guilt... (J)

(The Odyssey) I am appalled at how Homer really doesn't mention the fact that Odysseus is cheating on Penelope, yet keeps suggesting that Penelope may be unfaithful to Odysseus... I feel bad for Odysseus, yet at the same time I think he is cunning and knows what he is doing... I am again appalled at Odysseus's greed in Book 12. He lets himself hear the Sirens song, gets his men killed By Scylla. He has no appreciation for the men who are helping him along on his journey! I can't believe these men are still helping him... (A)

3. Open/conventional

In this category, the selection of points is quite wide-ranging, but not necessarily rich. The focus is often on the conventional technical aspects of the text. In content terms, there is a tendency to select for noting customs or relationships that are unfamiliar. A realist response predominates, particularly in relation to the psychology of characters. There is sometimes a disjunction between the material noted and the emotional/aesthetic response that is claimed.

(Beowulf) While I really did look up to Beowulf's character, I found it difficult to get into the story or relate to any of the characters. This could be attributed to the lack of women in Beowulf. There is only one woman and she is barely spoken of. The culture and values in Beowulf are also worlds away from mine and I couldn't relate to them... I really liked the ending, how Beowulf was admired and respected so much even amongst people of a different nation... (E)

(Macbeth) I'm going to look at the symbolism, because there's a lot of it, and I really enjoy reading into the subtext and analysing the beautiful language. Unfortunately this version doesn't have the little column down the side that explains what's going on and what the old words mean, so I'm going to have to rely on my memory and common sense for this one...! (B)

4. Thin/non-literary

In this category, the selection of points is poor and thin. The writer makes up the substance of the log by focusing on a particular issue and writing a comment around that issue. Although it is an issue which has been generated, sometimes loosely, by the text, any real connection between the issue and the text is lost. The "literariness" of this instance of the issue is scarcely recognised.

(The Canterbury Tales) The Shipman's Tale was again repulsive and depicts women as sexual objects, to be played and duped by men. I thought it was terrible to portray a monk as conniving for sexual favours... I found it offensive that she (the Prioress) singled out Jewish people; couldn't Chaucer just have said non-Christians? (A)

The Wife of Bath struck me as quite amazing for a text coming from this time. Sex was quite taboo and a promiscuous woman would have been considered a whore. Even to this day, promiscuity in a woman tarnishes her reputation and leaves the word slut in mind. Is it fair that men who enjoy sex are studs and women sluts? (I)

There are a number of related conceptual frameworks which might allow us to make sense of these categories. Let us start with the very simplest of these frameworks –

deep approach/surface approach – and explore the way in which it maps on to these categories which have been generated in much more discipline-specific terms. Generically, we think of surface approaches as ways of handling academic tasks which do not seek for the meaning inherent in the task. Students taking a surface approach perform the task in a way which seeks to reproduce what the teacher is asking for rather than to understand the principle behind the task or to get at the meaning in the task for themselves. Students taking a deep approach perform the task in a way that enables them to build understanding, to internalise it as meaningful.

In an early elaboration of this, Entwistle and Ramsden (1983) identify three aspects of engagement likely to be present in a deep approach. These are: making sense of the internal structure of the thing to be learned; recognising its connections with other knowledge and experience; and seeing its significance, seeing how it might change or reinforce some part of one's world-view. Within this account, students taking a surface approach focus on single disconnected bits rather than the whole; they do not relate what they are doing to any other knowledge or experience, and they certainly fail to see any bigger significance.

Bringing this account to bear on these categories is not easy. Although the category descriptions might tend to suggest the possibility of seeing the third and fourth categories as surface approach, this doesn't work well. In both of these categories, but particularly in the last, there is clearly quite strong engagement via the second, and perhaps even the third, of Entwistle and Ramsden's aspects. These students *are* taking elements of the text and making connections with their own experience; they are even seeing the texts – often with feelings of glad surprise – as having something to say on issues with contemporary relevance. What's missing, from the perspective of Entwistle and Ramsden's account, are clear signs that the students are trying to relate the parts they are seeing to a (textual) whole. Interestingly, this is also missing from the first category, where, however, it is arguable that the qualities of attentiveness and responsiveness, appreciation of the literary mode, are at a premium.

Before saying anything further about this, it might be useful to try another analysis arising out of a different conceptual framework, namely that of the SOLO Taxonomy. (This acronym stands for Structure of the Observed Learning Outcome.) This taxonomy, (Biggs & Collis, 1982) suggests that the quality of any performance can be assessed by focusing on its internal structure. At the lowest level, *pre-structural* performances have no salient points and no coherence. At the *uni-structural* level, performances make reference minimally to one or two relevant points. At the *multi-structural* level, many relevant points or aspects are included, but there is no evidence of a coherent relationship between these points. At the *relational* level, performances include relevant content and demonstrate an understanding of how the material coheres. At the *extended abstract* level, performances not only demonstrate understanding of the internal relationships but can relate the material to a bigger landscape.

Again, the fit is by no means perfect: Category 2 seems to fit the *relational* level in a recognisable way. Beyond this, although it may well be possible to say of Category 4 that it represents a performance of engagement that is not much more than *uni-structural*, we may not feel satisfied that that assessment sufficiently recognises the undoubted engagement (for all that its focus is not particularly literary). And there is something about consigning both Category 3 and Category 1 performances to the same level, *multi-structural*, that rings even louder alarm bells. At face value, neither seems to be entering *relational* territory, that is, neither seems to be building towards a way of making sense of the text as a whole, but the selection of the "raw material" mustered within Category 1 is qualitatively different from that mustered within Category 3. If and when an interpretation of the text is required, then the Category 1 interpretation will necessarily be underpinned by a much more complex awareness of the text than the category 3 interpretation. And indeed, when we look back to the ready ascription of

Category 2 to the relational level, are we entirely satisfied with this "ranking" of the performances of logging? How do we regard the difference between the meaning-making impulse of Category 2 work and the crucial openness to aesthetic or emotional impact that is the hallmark of Category 1?

Once more, let us leave this analytical framework and try one further lens. Bereiter and Scardamalia are educational psychologists interested in the question of expertise. In seeking an explanation as to why some people repeat performances of competence without ever advancing in knowledge, and others hone their competence to ever greater edges of expertise, they advance a distinction between people who solve problems by accommodating the problem as best they can to the knowledge they have, and those who see problems as occasions of challenge where learning must advance if the problem is to be solved optimally. Bereiter and Scardamalia term this distinction the "best fit" approach as opposed to the "schema building" approach (1993). It has interesting relevance here. In elaborating their description of best fit learners, Bereiter and Scardamalia note particularly their tendency to foreclose – to jump prematurely to meaning-making, often without sufficiently pausing to see the essential character of what they are trying to understand. The schema builders defer settling on an interpretation as they try to get at the essential elements of the thing they are trying to understand.

This illuminates the categories in a somewhat different way. We will probably be happy to see Category 4 as a fairly crude version of best fit. Category 3 is a problem, not really demonstrating a strong enough meaning-making impulse to suggest either of these approaches. But the distinction gives us a very interesting way of looking at Categories 1 and 2. Where Category 1 emerges problematically from both the deep/surface and SOLO analyses, within this framework it can be seen as enabling schema building, as a confident attempt to see as many aspects as possible of the text before there is any move to foreclose. It would be possible to see Category 2, on the other hand, as less like the most expert approach and more like a version of best fit.

Discussion

The overarching purpose of research into practice is to try to understand better what is happening for students within arrangements which we design with the intention of supporting their learning. This means gathering information about students' activity and analysing it in a more systematic and reflective way than is always possible in the midst of practice. It also means analysing that information both in the light of the discipline's understanding of itself and also of research on learning. It sounds straightforward. But a couple of things make it complicated. The first is that the discipline's understanding of how it does business is often not explicit; the second is that generic learning theory doesn't always seem to fit or to help.

To take up first the discipline's account of itself and its pedagogy: although there have been numerous attempts to analyse and teach the process of literary reading and response, it is fair to say that the pedagogy of the discipline within the university has not been systematically grounded in a discussion of how to read. It has focused rather on the ultimate expression of the response in literary criticism. The relationship between the act of reading and the re-presentation of the text that is necessarily involved in essays, exams, etc has been left tacit and largely unexamined. It may well differ even between experts. One of these points of potential difference is brought into focus by the logbook initiative. This is the question of the "how" and "when" of interpretation. When does the act of making sense of the text as a whole occur? When should it occur? Should responsiveness be held open and meaning-making deferred, held in suspension? Or is it rather the sign of responsive reading that the reader will begin to foreclose, even begin to read selectively, as the "reading" gathers momentum?

It is noteworthy that this is not a question that can be answered from generic learning research. None of the conceptual frameworks applied (procedural versus meaning-making practice, deep/surface approaches, the SOLO Taxonomy, "best fit" versus schema-building approaches) provides us with a satisfying way of understanding the work generated. This is not to say that these analytical frameworks are inadequate either in how they have been derived or in how they are formulated and used. It is rather to recognise that there are processes of work within disciplines which need to be understood primarily in their own terms. These analyses may then be able to be boosted by the theory: if we were to understand category 1, for example, as the management of multiple potential "readings", then we might well go back in to the selections to look for the micro-signs of relationality, of challenges confronted, of schema-building.

This paper is not an end-point. Ideally, it would have produced a set of recommendations for improving student learning, for changes to the instructions, the modelling and the criteria associated with the logbooks. In fact, it produces a set of prior questions, questions which only the discipline can answer. Equally important, it joins its voice to the growing body of scholarship recognising the need for the articulation into the disciplines of much of our generic learning theory.

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