Experiencing literature: student teachers views of the value of literary experience.

Andrew Goodwyn, Professor of Education, Head of Education, The Institute of Education ,The University of Reading.

Contact: Andrew Goodwyn
THE INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION, THE UNIVERSITY OF READING,
BULMERSHE COURT READING RG6 1HY, UK

Tel: 0118 3788868
Fax: 0118 3782080
E-mail: a.c.goodwyn@reading.ac.uk
Experiencing literature: student teachers views of the value of literary experience.

‘Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to digested and swallowed; that is, some books are to be read only in parts, others to be read, but not curiously, and some few to be read wholly, and with diligence and attention’.

Francis Bacon

Introduction

Recent years have seen a steady increase in the importance of empirical studies of literary experience. Findings from this mostly experimental work are beginning to identify psychological patterns that may be unique to ‘literary reading’ and are building strong arguments for the importance of such reading in human development. Recent years have seen an equal trend in literary theory to absolutely dismiss the notion that ‘reading literature is good for you’, especially any notion of moral benefit. The empirical findings do not go so far as to claim that there can be simplistic moral benefits leading to becoming a better person but they do suggest that readers are enabled in a number of ways through literary experiences. The findings also suggest that all readers may be enabled in this way but that regular literary readers are ‘more so’. Put simply, this is an argument for teaching literature in schools without making inflated claims for it but maintaining the notion of such reading as ‘beneficial’. A new element within the empirical studies field is the notion of evolutionary culture, asking why it is that all cultures which have developed writing have a ‘Literature’ which does consistently occupy high status in each society?

It has long been established that teachers of literature in secondary schools see their own experience of literary reading as part of their professional identity. Like literature teachers at University, they spend much time in the interpretive mode, especially when teaching students who are post 16, but fundamentally they define themselves as ‘readers’ of literature, not writers about it. In other words they are closer to ordinary readers of literature than literary critics. Beginning teachers are inevitably struggling to establish their new, professional identity whilst reflecting on their reading lives. They therefore make an interesting case in point.

This small scale study of student teachers consisted of semi-structured interviews in which each student was asked to reflect on their own literary experiences and to consider how these experiences might inform their own teaching. They were asked to articulate their rationale for asking school students to engage with literature and to propose what makes a text ‘literary’. They were also asked to consider the notion of the kind of reader that they have become through both literary experience and literary study. A short section of the interview asked them to consider the status of literature in secondary schools, as well as being relevant to the current study, these questions link to an ongoing project by the researcher investigating attitudes to literature in schools more generally.
The findings support the idea that reading literature has benefited the participants and that they believe the right kinds of teaching can have similar benefits for children. They also demonstrate that participants do believe that ‘literary reading’ is part of the spectrum of reading but with particular properties and characteristics that do justify its special status in society and in schools.

**Literary reading: an emergent field**

‘Literature’; although no-one can satisfactorily define this term, we nevertheless know a great deal about it as a phenomenon. Arguably, if we include oral traditions, it has been around for as long as we have had language. It has been around more concretely and more permanently since we have had sign systems, especially written language. Finally since the invention of the printing press, it has been around in material ways that have allowed us to store it, distribute it and take the classification of it into types of literature, that mean it now has innumerable sub-categories. Equally the concept of interpretation has been around as long as texts have existed in hand written form, indeed the interpreters have claimed very high status, whether that of the priest or the literary critic; both have belonged to an elite group of divine like readers.

Why is it then that we still know relatively little about literary readers? In Education we do know a great deal about the early learning of reading and we know a considerable amount about the specific difficulties of learning to read for some children. Adult literacy [meaning chiefly illiteracy] is also a well developed field. Testing reading comprehension is certainly an industry and a great deal of research continues to be devoted to it. But as the child reader becomes the adolescent, and then the independent adult, the picture fades. At first glance this seems perfectly reasonable, there is no problem, an independent adult reader is the finished article. However, one only has to consider the industrial complex that surrounds the writing, distribution and ownership of literature [small ‘l’] to begin to speculate about who all these literary readers are. Equally, the reading of literature [more often here with a capital ‘L’], is given tremendous status in many societies, so much so that it is prescribed in schools and colleges around the world. Finally, why do so many ‘ordinary’ people choose literary reading, should we not know more about what such reading actually provides them with, what kind of ‘experience’ does it offer.

The last 25 years [or so] have begun the process of creating some balance between interpretative studies of literature and some attention to ‘real readers’. Indeed literary criticism has spent so much time debating its internal crises that it seems to have no energy left except to pronounce its own demise. Meanwhile readers cheerfully continue to exist and read literature and teachers, especially in schools, continue to help children enjoy it --- in other words there are plenty of real readers to research. Over this 25 year period there has been a strong move to generate a history of reading based on all kinds of records and archives. In parallel, there has been a good deal of work to establish an empirical base for our understanding of what real readers are actually ‘like’. Most of this work has been either experimental or qualitative. I would argue that David Miall’s
‘Literary Reading: Empirical and Theoretical Studies’ provides an excellent overview of the experimental work although he covers much other ground also. My small scale study is a modest qualitative beginning to developing my own reflections on how we may need to re-conceptualise ‘literary reading’ in schools. Given the recent emergence of the field, its claims are at best modest and often speculative, often developing more theory building and hypotheses than ‘facts’ about literary readers.

However, I shall briefly summarise, drawing chiefly on Miall, what these empirical studies are suggesting may be salient in our attempt to understand literary reading.

The most obvious, but salient point, is that these studies investigate actual readers, and readers accounts of their experiences of reading, what Miall simply calls ‘real acts of reading’ [Miall, 2007, p.2]. These readers are usually ‘ordinary’, that is they are not students of literature who are self-consciously interpretive, nor are they ‘expert’ i.e. literary academics.

Evidence is increasingly suggesting that certain texts have a quality broadly characterised by ‘literariness’, although it is also clear that many texts can be read by readers as if they have this quality whether the author/s intended it or not. However some texts are far more marked by such characteristics and far more readers are affected by these characteristics. One very marked feature is ‘dehabituation’, that is literary texts offer new frames for understanding and feeling about the real world we inhabit.

There is much debate about how far the formal properties of literature are the ‘measure’ of literariness as once claimed by the Russian Formalists. Some reading experiments certainly investigate how conscious readers are of the presence of, for example, metaphor or other figurative uses of language. However, currently the emphasis is far more in the tradition of reader response that it is the quality of, and intensity of, interaction between reader and text that relates to literariness.

Another debate centres around the parallel emergence of ‘cognitive poetics’. This approach takes well known cognitive functions such as schemata, frames and theories of mind and applies them to reading experiences in order to explain them. However, as the term cognitive suggests, the focus is on functions not feelings. Most readers may well be making use of the cognitive elements of the mind but their pre-occupation is with feeling, it is the affective element that characterises a literary reading to them.

Most important of all, and most complex, these studies of ordinary readers investigate the experience of literature that readers attest. The readers are rarely pre-occupied with a definitive interpretation [unlike the critic], they are immensely concerned with significance. Of course readers are producing meanings all the time that they read but empirical studies are not out to ‘test’ what might be called plausibility of meaning, they are interested in what readers find of significance in a text.

The most recent development in these studies has been more speculative in that has begun to look at the experience of literature at the level of cultures, asking the question
‘How do we explain the persistent existence and importance of literature over long periods of time?’. One possible answer is that literature has some evolutionary dimension, that it is a sign of human development. This takes literature back into the rhetoric of the grand claim and perhaps suggests a circularity i.e. we start by saying let us investigate the discredited claims for literature as a civilising influence and focus on ordinary readers and then end up by ‘proving’ those claims. However, what currently avoids that circularity is the grounded nature of its claim i.e. that the more literate the population of any country, the more people voluntarily read literature, often for the entirety of their lives.

**The research study**

The research did not set out to ‘test’ whether the above six themes were recognised by the participants but adopted a more conventional autobiographical approach and a principally phenomenological stance. All the participants were members of a group of combined PGCE and GTP group training to teach English. They were all known to the researcher and on first name, conversational terms. Inevitably the authority position of the researcher may have influenced respondents. However the researcher was not acting as course leader and was more of a part-time member of the course team so reducing this constraining influence.

All participants were volunteers, interviews were conducted at the time requested by the individual, several were re-arranged to suit their schedules. Each interview was semi-structured, recorded on an unobtrusive digital recorder, in a private office with no interruptions by phone. The complete list of interview prompts in included as an Appendix. Interviews lasted from 30-45 minutes. The research period was mid January to mid February i.e. about half way through their training year. Of the group 10 were PGCE students which meant they had spent one term in School A and were now becoming familiar with School B. This was felt to be an interesting time to interview the participants as they would have comparative insights into the literature teaching of their two schools. The two GTP students had only one school to reflect on at this stage. Participants were of different ages and one was male but for the purposes of this very small scale study these factors have been excluded except where the interviewee consciously refers to them.

Another relevant factor was that each student has completed in December an assignment that required them to reflect on their own reading history and also to investigate some aspect of reading that interested them in their school. The researcher deliberately did not refer to this recent experience but participants could clearly draw on it where relevant. All interviews were transcribed and read repeatedly to identify themes and patterns.
Findings

The transcripts of interviews average 4,000 words and for the purposes of this paper, the focus will be on literature in relation to their decision to teach, their impressions of schools, their reaction to the idea of removing literature from English and their views on the experience of literary reading.

Becoming a teacher

Although the group had diverse backgrounds and ages, they all believed that their own interests in literature were a strong part of their decision to become an English teacher. The only differences were of degree. In the transcripts A is the researcher, I plus a number indicates the respondent

A Where does your own interest in literature come into your choice, your decision to become an English teacher, is there a relationship between those two things or not?

I3 Um, yeah I think there is because I enjoy reading, I enjoy interpreting books so I loved, I always wanted to do that in the classroom and let other people appreciate books in the same way that’s probably the link between those two.

A And so where did literature fit within that decision or after that decision or how important is that aspect of your study in your life to becoming an English teacher of the literature route?

I4 Um I suppose its fairly central, I needed, I think I needed to have some time away from my experience at school to be able to see how important that was to me but I also loved the language side of it so I think, I don’t think you can separate the two. I love reading, I love literature I want to be able to share that pattern with pupils is the idealistic side of it, the realistic side of it is a lot of the pupils are never going to achieve the level of passion that I have for reading but to be able to open some doors into books for them and to show them that its not something that is purely an academic subject, that they can actually go and lose themselves in a book for an hour and its more rewarding than sitting and watching an hour’s television. Then if I could do that for a few out of the hundreds that I’ll end up teaching I suppose I would have to be happy.

So, it is clear that the experience of literature remains a strong motive in choosing English teaching. All of the group mentioned important English teachers as an influence on their interest in literature and 9 of them saw a direct link to becoming a teacher as a result. This was not a question from the researcher so references to important teachers come spontaneously from participants, for example:
A Yeah absolutely, so what part, if any, did that experience of literature play in your decision to become a teacher?

I6 Um, teachers themselves um, I, it was something that I always loved and I would always love whether or not I did it at Uni or whether I chose to teach it, there were certain characters that I had come away from, one teacher at school and one specific lecturer when I was at Univ and I’d come away buzzing, wanting to find out more about what she’d been talking about, I’d want to go and read the chapters in books that she’d written just because she had this energy and she’d created this energy within me and in all of her, in her modules that she taught I did a lot better because somehow I just, I just was on a similar wavelength and when I left University I didn’t go into teaching straight away, I went into a job and I was very, just, I couldn’t see the point in doing something that was the same every single day and was very mundane and I wanted to do something that made me feel like I did when I was at Uni and it made sense that if I could, even if one person out of the whole of my career would find hidden depths and that enthusiasm and that interest that she did in me then that would have made things worthwhile whereas in my other job I didn’t feel like that at all so it would have definitely have been the way in which things were taught and the enthusiasm just really enthused me really and I was amazing.

Impressions of current schools

Overall, these impressions, are unsurprisingly very varied, and seem as much to do with what opportunities have come their way as with any real consistent reactions but the following points emerge.

As a group they feel literature retains status but most feel this is now highly compromised by the assessment regime i.e. teachers and students simply ‘have to do it’. In other words its importance per se, is obscured. The group also expressed concerns about how much time was spent on extracts and how little on complete texts. They recognised the challenge of teaching longer texts but felt that much more was lost by such an emphasis on extracts.

I3. Overall I suppose its very much exam texts, its focused on exam texts and the only freedom is in Year 7 and Year 8 and possibly, I mean, the school I was in last term they were doing texts in the first term of Year 9 so that they could actually do something other than SATs work and then putting all the SATs work into this term um but at that level you can’t do a Dickens or something like that. I mean we did do a bit of Dickens through extracts but it wasn’t very satisfying because you want to say you know ‘Great Expectations’ is a fabulous book but actually they are too young or haven’t, maybe not too young some of them but haven’t got the skills to really appreciate that. Um… but I think because I just love to lose myself in a book I find it frustrating sometimes that its very exam orientated you know and sometimes you get the impression from the teachers that “we’ve got to do this book”. Its not that “we are going to read this book” its “we are going to do this
book” and all the connotations that that has and all the pupils equally is “we are doing Shakespeare”. “We are doing our exam text”. “We’ve got to get through it and write a piece of coursework on it”. Or “learn it for the exam and then we will never touch it again”.

Most of the group felt that some teachers knew how to escape the assessment regime particularly by using ‘dramatic approaches’, ‘creative responses’ and ‘keeping it interactive’. But they also felt they were witnessing a great deal of stultifying teaching.

Becoming a Literature Teacher

In reflecting on what kind of literature teacher they would like to be the key words are ‘passionate’, ‘inspiring’, ‘creative’, ‘relevant’, ‘motivating’;

A Coming to you and being aspirational, what kind of literature teacher would you like to be?

I.4 I’d like to be somebody who can get kids excited in literature, however that is, whether that’s through bringing in drama activities whether that’s true, getting them doing things they wouldn’t associate with books, you know, getting them, let’s have a think, maybe with Lord of the Flies, getting them splitting off into two groups, just you know being in different camps, drawing maps of the island, working out how the conflicts could be happening, doing role plays, its getting loads of activities in there so that they are not sitting there um getting bored, because that what I’m seeing a lots going on really of kids getting bored so that’s what I hope that I can be exciting that I can impart some of my own passion for literature with them you know.

I.10 An inspiring one I think, one that can take a book that the kids will originally think oh god do we have to read this and make them want to carry on reading it and make them want to read it again or read something else by the same author or on the same subject matter or just to really get, get them interested in it not just to get them through an exam would be my main, because I think a lot of the teaching is to get them through an exam and to get them to pass their GCSE so they they are picking out the bits they need to pass the exam rather than getting them interested. Yeah that’s would I would like to think.

Their aspirations are very much to be like the particular teachers that they remember from their own school experiences. Inevitably they have little pedagogic expertise with which to articulate how such impact might be achieved. What is striking is the emphasis on the affective and the personal, especially the concept of making texts connect with the feelings and lives of their students.
Retaining literature?

One of the most striking findings relates to the ‘hypothetical’ questions asked about retaining literature. In response to the idea that the Government might require English to leave out Literature at Key Stage Three, the universal response was of ‘horror’. The suggestion was characterised as ‘shocking, ‘horrifying’, ‘devastating’ etc. and the rationale given was that literature was the most engaging and interesting element in the curriculum and that it allowed for interesting ways of teaching the ‘other stuff’, like grammar. Over half said emphatically that they would not wish to be an English teacher in these circumstances. There is a strong relationship here to their original decision to become a teacher.

However, the hypothesis about Key Stage Four i.e. should it be taught only to those who choose it produced more diverse responses. Four of the group were clear that the age of 14 was just too young to decide and the benefits of literature were far too important to be optional. Four saw the rationale for offering choice to ‘young adults’ but felt that some literature should be retained in compulsory English. The other four felt that the advantages in having only enthusiastic students were very significant, and that it was a workable idea.

The experience of literature

Without exception the group spoke of the intensity of their literary reading experiences and all the first five themes identified in the section on empirical studies came out. In that sense it is important to stress that these readers remain ‘ordinary’; they reflect on their reading as an affective, psychological event not as an exercise in interpretation. Comments on what we gain from literature are detailed and given their significance to the main theme of this research are presented at some length :-

I.10 I think from my own personal point of view if you read a book its escapism, its sort of the beauty of the language, its like watching a good film but even better because you are creating all the images in your own mind and so its that ability to use your imagination and absorb yourself in another world I suppose in that sense. So its relaxing you know on the whole and that’s what I’m finding difficult sometimes with books I think I should go back and read but I don’t want to go back and read books I’ve read before cos there’s just so many books about so many subjects and topics and you can learn so much about cultures and, and what with the modern books that are out at the moment, and various different countries that you can learn about things without having to read a history book I find it cool. I don’t know there’s just so much in books.

I.9 I can only talk from a personal point of view can’t I. We gain a sense of the people around us, about people with needs, about the world, I think it opens our horizons and it opens our horizons in the real world, you know cultural, literature,
but also our horizons with our imagination, science fiction or, Harry Potters and all that kind of thing, so yeah.

I.1 I think an emotional experience, certainly if you really engage with a novel or a text, there is something which can be learned emotionally from that and I think I look at language and if its really beautiful it quite touches me and there is only things that you can learn about different cultures and different worlds and different times in studying literature which you wouldn’t necessarily learn because you haven’t been, I think um literature from different cultures and positions is brilliant, a brilliant extra to add to the National Curriculum because I think that as I say I’ve really enjoyed engaging with different cultures and I think that’s a great way into it, rather than sitting down and teaching specifics about a culture you are doing that through an artistic form.

I.4 ....... Escapism, a view into another world, broadening of mind, different points of view um..... I’ve never really put it into words before I sort of ... higher order thinking skills, interpretation. I suppose I’m talking about what I gain from it ... appreciation of craft just read Ian McEwan’s ‘Saturday’ the crafting in that is exceptional, pure enjoyment I suppose, I always end up going back to the escapism bit, my husband can’t understand how I can read and not notice the time pass.

When the group reflect on the nature of the state of mind to which we are referring they are equally detailed:

I.10 I think it is a relaxed um shutting everything else out type of feeling and its that trying to think how you would describe it but I know if I read a book you create what its like in your own mind and then if somebody makes a film of it its never the same its never as good, books because you’ve created your own images and your own ideas of how those characters are and its not really answering the question but its trying to put it into, you do just create that world for yourself in that book and just delve yourself right into it I think.

I.9 I’m completely lost, as in a good way, the whole world shakes off of me and you know my husband he gets, poor thing, and when I get a book I can see the disappointment cross his face because he knows that that’s it for the next how many hours or how many weeks while I read this book, I’m lost in another world, its fantastic.

I.1 I think if I am that engaged I can shut off everything around me and I think on this course you learn to read anywhere. So I think that literally I could be in a noisy room and just shut off and then completely as you say engaged with the text and yeah there is a real emotional response for me if I really engage with the text. I can’t put a book down and I’ll stay up til 2 in the morning if I have to to read it but
its an enjoyable experience which I think transcends other forms of .... what’s the word, entertainment for me I guess but also I think it makes me kind of analyse everything else in my life as well. My boyfriend whinges that he can’t watch a film with me anymore because I have to pull out all the references and it bores him because he doesn’t know what all the Oedipus complex is, that that image was from Mac Beth so... yeah.

I.8 I think it’s the kind where you can almost feel absolutely desperate when you know you close the end of you close that final page of a book and you think oh I don’t want that to stop I think its an experience where you shut everything else out. You um, its an escapism, it’s a peaceful activity, its something that you, that may represent time by yourself and quiet time, it’s the end of the day, its um what else is it? Its life changing sometimes you know, you read books and you honestly think that they are life changing. I thought that about Philip Pullman’s Dark Materials to tell you the truth I thought you know that’s life changing stuff, not everybody would think that about Philip Pullman’s children’s books, in inverted commas, but I thought that so...

I.4 ... total absorption, I don’t notice what’s going on and I get really, really annoyed if anyone interrupts me. Its just a purely internally focused shut-off from the world. I don’t know I’ve never verbalised it before, its just, but obviously that’s not something that you can pass on, you can tell people about it, but its not a skill that you can pass on.

The comment from I.4 is intriguing. First she comments that she has never ‘verbalised’ it before and so she sees it as ‘not something that you can pass on’; in fact she has just passed that experience on, at least to some extent through verbalizing it. However, she feels it is ‘not a skill that you can pass on’. This is a key question for future research. Certainly the state of mind in question is not a simple condition that, once appreciated, is sought out by such readers again and again. Can it be produced in school? It must be asked whether the participants felt that they ‘ought’ to feel this way given their aspirations to be good teachers and the role of their interviewer. This was certainly not the researcher’s impression, participants were visibly animated as they spoke and were both fluent and spontaneous in their comments.

Can students access this experience in school?

The group were mixed about this but the majority felt it was possible. Responses were essentially on spectrum from I.9 who felt it was something that an individual child would determine:

I.9 No, not really ---- I mean I think we can try and engage them, try to get them involved so that, you know if they really, maybe it will work for them like it worked for me, you can’t force that on anyone, you can only try and encourage it by giving them books by trying to you know bring texts in that they might relate to in
the way you teach it and maybe giving them the chance to have silent reading and then looking at it but you can’t, you can’t make it, the child will either develop that or will have it and that’s it.

Some of the group felt that a version of the experience was possible:

I.10 Yeah, I think with hard work I think when the books, even just with Year 7 the novel that I taught I think when I first read the book I thought ok, alright I’ll have a go at teaching it but reading it and examining it and getting the kids to really think about it the book did come alive and it did to them and you could tell, they really explored the characters and I think that will help them go forward with reading and understanding and using their emotions when they are reading the book as well I think you can.

Others were clear that this was the real point of teaching literature:

I.8 I think we can I think that’s why I want to be a teacher because I don’t know that I could give that to everybody I don’t even know if I could give that to half the people in the class. I very much hope that I could but if I could give that to a handful of people as I you know as I go through my career that would be fabulous I’d feel as if I’d done something really important but yeah, I hope I could. I hope I can open up the opportunities that literature gives people whilst they are in my classroom I hope I can make it an enjoyable experience and something that they can use in their lives and in their leisure time as well.

Conclusions

In preparing this paper two other interesting elements have been identified that offer some complementary perspectives and that will be given a brief mention. The first is the concept of ‘bibliotherapy’ which was developed especially after the second world war as a means to helping returning soldiers deal with their issues and adjust to normal life. The idea that reading can help an individual deal with personal life is, of course, not restricted to extreme cases, but this field has some empirical underpinning. This point will be developed below.

‘Voluntary slow reading’ is a concept that is rapidly gaining ground. It has its ancient origins in the notion that the close study of sacred texts required both exact attention to each word and a meditative frame of mind. It connects directly to what in literary studies is called close reading and Birkerts has described as deep reading. In summary, the interesting point is that ‘slow’ readers have been much studied, but that competent, and even expert readers, who choose to read deliberately slowly, have not. The key point for this research is that such reading leads to a deeper and more affective interaction with the text. There might appear to be a contradiction here in that such reading is often a feature of sections of text i.e. that readers linger over passages rather like looking at an extract. However, the key points are first, that the reader has full agency [no-one has selected the piece of text for them] and second that they are consciously engaging with a full text.
These two fields seem to offer complementary perspectives on the value of literary reading.

This small scale study adds modestly to the body of evidence about the experiences of literary readers and to the more developed field of teacher identity. The findings about these student teachers of English can be summarised as follows, they:-

Consider that their own interest and experience of literature is a very strong motivator in choosing to teach English;

Have also been strongly influenced by ‘inspirational’ teachers of literature;

Consider that literature retains status in schools but it principally has importance because of the assessment regime rather than per se;

Feel that there is too much reliance on extracts and not enough on whole texts [challenging though whole texts can be];

Feel that much teaching is ‘stultifying’ and ‘impersonal’;

Would be horrified if literature was removed from KS3;

Have mixed feelings about making it an option in KS4 but most would retain it;

Want to be inspirational, passionate teachers of literature;

Are certain that literature offers much to all students;

Are certain that they have gained enormously from literary reading;

Feel that literary reading is a characterised by a powerful, emotional state of mind;

Believe that this experience is possible for school students but that, under current circumstances, certain students are more likely to benefit from it than others.

What next?

The above findings are, in many ways, unsurprising. These are ‘ordinary’ readers, but not that ordinary, they have extensive histories as readers of literature and have, almost all of them, consciously studied at degree level. In their training programmes, and in their schools, they are grappling with the nature of teaching literature. However, they have real aspirations to teach it well and, it may be argued, and to take a point from cognitive poetics, they are not yet determined by the kinds of schemata induced by highly prescribed and scripted teaching frames, they still may have open, enquiring minds.
There is scope for further research to learn from such student teachers about the nature of literary reading.

However, the next phase of this research will need at least two dimensions. Can we identify experienced teachers who can offer their students the experience of literary reading and learn from them. The challenge, in these prescriptive times will be ‘how’. It seems unlikely that examination results, for example, would be a measure of such teaching. It may well be that professional networks and ‘volunteers’ have to be the starting point.

The other dimension must be the equally problematic investigation of adolescent readers from the perspective of ‘literary’ reading and this will need to include a spectrum of readers. How do they ‘read’. Do some such readers adopt voluntary slow reading, perhaps intuitively? If so, what are its effects? Have some had therapeutic moments, perhaps through their teacher’s choice of a very ‘relevant’ text, whether in class or out? Can the crowded classroom ever offer that chance for ‘deep’, ‘engaged’ reading when the world disappears? Is the whole approach to Literature teaching in schools defeating the point of including it in the curriculum?

References


Some useful references for ‘Voluntary Slow Reading’

Bacon, Francis (2001) Essays, civil and Moral, volume 3, part 1, New York, Harvard Classics,


**Appendix**

**Student teachers and literary reading - Interview questions/prompts**

Did you enjoy reading literature in secondary school? You might want to break that down into stages?  
During those years, did you read much outside school? You might want to break that into stages.  
Can you recall any reading events/experiences that stand out in any way?  
What was the ‘experience’ of literature like for you?

How would you sum up the experience of your degree?  
   {if they did English --- ask about becoming a ‘critic’}

Did your relationship to literature influence your decision to become an English teacher?

What have you observed of literature teaching so far? Your reaction?  
How do you see the ‘Status’ of literature in schools?  
What are the challenges of literature teaching?  
What are your plans and expectations for the coming months?  
What kind of literature teacher would you like to be – be aspirational!
If the government recommended that literature, being really for pleasure, should no longer be taught in secondary schools, how would you react?
If the government said literature should become an option in secondary school for some pupils, and that we should just concentrate on language teaching – what would your response be?

What do you think we gain from reading literature?
How would you describe the experience of reading literature?

*This document was added to the Education-line database on 23 January 2009*