Report on the 2021 Networking Event

"Close Reading, Open Minds: Literature for Health and Wellbeing"

Executive Summary

- Triangulation among researchers of questions and methods is needed.

- Descriptions of the reading experience are often removed from the act itself, giving us limited insight on their own.

- Qualitative video research methods such as Interpersonal Process Recall could be more appropriate.

- Apps such as Poetry Explorer can help capture the reading act in real time.

- Experience sampling, physiological measures, and brain imaging may also be fruitful methods.

- Reading for pleasure enhances wellbeing and is more intrinsically motivated and sustainable.

- Shared reading potentially promotes social cohesion and may have measurable, emergent properties.

- Shared reading can make texts more accessible (e.g., hearing poems aloud).

- Some readers find joy and power in ambiguity, while others are frustrated. Are ambiguous texts good for health?

- "Close reading" needs distinguishing from targeted reading (reading a text about what you are experiencing).

- Research that evidences the value of reading is still needed, as well as studies of why and how it adds value.

- Collaborations with social prescribing schemes could be useful here.

Topics for Future Research

- Reading and social isolation.

- Solitary reading vs shared reading.

- Reading experience by text (poetry vs prose; literature vs newspaper article).

- "Close reading" or "serious reading" as a literary and psychology practice.

- Relationships between the literary value and health value of a text.

- The role of literary form and ambiguity in a wellbeing context.

- Recording and reporting the experience of reading.

- Reading experiences by mode (reading vs listening; screen vs page).

- Technology and reading for health.

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Introduction

In March 2021, an emerging group of researchers at UWE Bristol organized a virtual symposium, aiming to establish a network of collaborators and work towards fundable projects. The event fostered collaboration between arts and science disciplines to explore connections between reading and health. It was funded by UWE's cross-faculty award, "ACE–HAS Connecting Research", and it fed into the UWE Research Group, "Delivering and Researching the Arts for Wellbeing" (DRAW).

The event was designed with the following broad aims in mind:

- Distinguishing different types of reading as a measurable factor in health and wellbeing;

- Examining kinds of psychological attention in reading, including mindfulness and flow states;

- Exploring literary form/technique in wellbeing contexts.

The event began with a keynote address. It then took shape as a series of structured discussions between a streamlined group of invited attendees, including researchers and practitioners from around the UK. This included researchers from ACE and HAS faculties at UWE, colleagues from a range of other universities, and representatives from key organisations such as the Institute of English Studies and Lapidus International. The event was designed to encourage discussion and prompt new ideas, feeding into future possibilities for collaborative funding bids.

Key Areas of Discussion

The day began with a keynote address from Philip Davis, Emeritus Professor of Literature and Psychology at the University of Liverpool. **Appendix 1** gives a detailed summary of this talk. Throughout the rest of the networking event, a series of discussions took place between the participants. Some of these discussions responded directly to the broad aims of the event given above, or to the questions raised by Professor Davis. Other discussions emerged from the specific research interests of attendees or arose organically through dialogue. Having navigated some of the topics and questions, the networking event was able to reach some other practical considerations for future research. Attendees also produced some recommendations or possibilities for projects that

would emerge from these talks. What follows is neither comprehensive nor chronological but offers a summary of some of our key discussion points.

Accessing the Reading Experience

In the keynote talk, Davis grappled with the difficulties of accessing the reading experience as it occurs, using means other than retrospective surveys. Participants discussed the possibility of using "experience sampling" methods, which might be used in the reading process to track momentary changes in state. At random times, participants might be asked to record how they are feeling, either qualitatively or quantitatively. These responses might be cross-referenced with physiological data.

Another possibility raised in our discussion was for participants to revisit the immediate notes they made during their experience, and to re-read these notes during a retrospective interview to try and re-experience the feeling. Like the use of video footage, part of the aim here is to recreate the atmosphere and process in which the original experience took place. We found this had parallels with "interpersonal process recall", in which therapy sessions are recorded, then played back whilst the client has the remote control. This creates autonomy over the initial experience, as the client pauses at their own key moments to describe what was important.

Forms of Literature

In Professor Davis's keynote talk, he spoke of "poems as arenas in which to have thoughts". Attendees discussed a ramification of this: that literary form and technique structure the reading experience, even if the reader has no technical understanding of those forms and techniques. If reading a literary

text is different from reading a newspaper or an instruction manual, then it is important to understand precisely what "literariness" is and how it is created. Exploring and quantifying the effects of literary form would begin to answer this question.

More broadly, we considered how researchers and practitioners might choose literary texts for their clients/subjects/participants to read. How should those choices be made, and how might the health value of a text relate to its "intrinsic" or "literary" value? We asked whether it was just the process of reading that matters (in health terms), rather than the choice of texts or the role of the facilitators. In order to establish a starting point for an experimental evidence base, we considered a crossover design, with one group reading literature, the other reading a newspaper. The problem is that there is no such thing as a neutral text to use as a control.

Modes of Delivery and Engagement

As well as thinking about literary form in relation to value, we considered different modes of engaging with the language of texts. Specifically, we considered how listening and reading might be contrasted as different activities. In many shared reading groups, the text is read aloud. Attendees were also pointed to the RES model of poetry therapy in the USA, which incorporates shared reading, group creative writing, and performance / reading aloud. We also noted that listening is also on the rise in society, reflected in the growing popularity of audiobooks, podcasts, and similar media.

Issues raised by different modes of engagement with literature might lead to research questions in themselves, or they might simply be practical considerations for researchers to navigate. We asked how audiobooks might compare to physical reading, and similarly whether there is a difference

between reading from a screen vs a page. Researchers must be clear that it is not just the words themselves that create the experience of reading, but also the environment and method of delivery.

Another consideration that might be both practical and academic is whether reading in the virtual space differs significantly from an in-person setting. Can we prove that people feel connected through a text, regardless of the setting? If shared reading doesn't work on Zoom, does that suggest that it was the physical setting that made a difference, rather than the text per se?

We also discussed the challenge of managing groups of participants with differing levels of reading competency, education, and/or confidence. This may be especially important with poetry, where some might find joy in ambiguity and multiplicity, but others might be frustrated and alienated. We discussed how literary language can be emotionally powerful, even if readers struggle to articulate what it means to them. We also considered that uncertainty and ambiguity are arenas in which we can explore and have thoughts. It may be that literary texts with ambiguity are better for mental health for this reason. We underlined that where voice and listening are components of the reading experience, the shared social experience of hearing the text can make the text more accessible and present for participants who may be intimidated by the text on a page.

What to Measure and How?

A related area that recurred throughout our discussions was an interlinking set of questions about what exactly we might seek to measure and how this might be achieved. We considered the possibility of using "serious reading," "literary reading," or "close reading" as its own kind of

intervention, separate from "targeted reading". The latter is often used, but makes a methodological assumption that, for example, someone suffering from pain would benefit from a text about pain.

If we conceive of "close reading" or "serious reading" of literature as constituted by subjective inner processes, how might we measure those processes *in real time* and how important is it to consider the ways in which the experience is reported after the fact? Participants discussed how a mixture of physiological measures might be employed, such as galvanic skin response, heart rate, and breathing. Using such measures in tandem with self-reported experience or qualitative interviewing might capture an optimum balance of data.

Considering the group dynamics of reading introduces further considerations. Some attendees were interested in whether, through shared reading, there is a kind of shared consciousness. If so, how might this be observed through physiological measures? Establishing a baseline heart rate for each member of a group, for example, might then allow the shared effects of reading to be tracked.

We agreed that a large, randomised control trial, taking place in multiple locations, was the only way to generate serious data that would be significantly persuasive to funders and policy makers. We considered what kinds of smaller pilot studies might be undertaken as a step towards this large aim. We thought about possible single-population or a single-condition sample to make a manageable and feasible study. We also compared the use of observational studies versus experimental studies, suggesting that only the latter can have the proper controls necessary to generating conclusive data.

In discussing ways of measuring the effects of reading, attendees underlined the importance of having a positive and negative effect scale. Prior research projects highlight that reading can have a negative effect which then has a positive effect on the group dynamic and the overall experience.

Funding, Stakeholders, Impact

One practical consideration was: what evidence would funders and healthcare practitioners want to see, for the health value of literature to be clear? Perhaps the planning of future research should start from this and work backwards. We oscillated between two possibilities: 1) seeking to pinpoint what is valuable in reading and why/how; 2) seeking to simply prove that the value exists.

Some of the attendees with the greatest experience of conducting research in this area felt that more work is needed to simply convince funders, practitioners, and policy makers that there is a measurable value in reading as a health or wellbeing intervention. Perhaps this needs to be reinforced in further research before we try to get any more specific.

Attendees considered working with Bristol libraries and other local services, especially those interested in social prescribing. For more formalised healthcare interventions, contacting local GPs and working with the local commissioning group may be routes to take. In broader terms of public engagement, we underlined the need to think about how literary experiences are packaged and marketed to participants and members of public.

Within Higher Education, we discussed how adjacent work in exploring arts for health might allow us to access existing relationships and routes to impact. This includes work completed by some of the

attendees at UWE and elsewhere. We also felt that student mental health was a pressing matter. Topics discussed at our event may be explored with student participants, perhaps even intersecting with pedagogic research questions.

Literature and Loneliness

The avenue for future enquiry which we discussed most extensively was the usefulness of reading in addressing social isolation. Here, we turned our attention not to the isolated reader, but isolation as a social health problem. We acknowledged that depression and isolation are interlinked crises in society which need addressing, and we sought ways of researching how and why literature can help.

The social value of literature has been increasingly recognised during COVID-19 and the further rise in isolation this has caused. We observed that listening to literature was also on the rise, making our questions about forms and modes of literature more urgent.

We felt that the relationship between social isolation and reading might be addressed in the long-term through a randomised control trial at multiple institutions. However, we also discussed short-term goals of pilot studies or case studies to lay a foundation. We asked what sources of funding might be available for smaller case studies, and how to take the planning/networking forward.

Attendees suggested established scales for measuring isolation, or related factors such as existential loneliness. The Campaign to End Loneliness offer resources on measuring loneliness: https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/frequently-asked-questions/measuring-loneliness/.

Meanwhile, Ryff's scale of psychological wellbeing is a multi-faceted way to measure the effect of an intervention: https://danrobertsgroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/PWB-Scale.pdf.

We hit on the question of whether reading literature alone can combat isolation/loneliness, or whether a group experience is necessary. We considered the possibility of comparing literature and visual art as interventions. Are there subsets of people who respond to different art forms?

We encountered the ethical/practical problem of expecting depressed/isolated/lonely people to read in isolation for an academic study. However, we also asked what the desired outcome of the intervention might be for participants. Do they want to be socially integrated, or do they just want to find meaning in their lives? Attendees suggested that logic models offer one way of tracking this.

Some Next Steps

We would love to continue the conversations and collaboration around literature and health. You can find Christine, Samuel, David, and Nicola on LinkedIn. You can also read more about DRAW (Delivering and Researching the Arts for Wellbeing) and follow the research group on Twitter (@DRAWatUWE).

Staying in touch will help us be responsive to future research and funding opportunities. The participants' combined expertise covers a range of areas in literature and psychology, but the networking event identified the following as particular priorities for future enquiry:

- Relationships between reading and social isolation.

- Solitary reading, its processes/effects, and its relationship with loneliness.

- Shared reading as both a group and individual experience.

- Comparing reading experiences by text (e.g., poetry vs prose; literature vs newspaper article).

- "Close reading" or "serious reading" as both a literary and psychology practice.

- Relationships between the literary value and health value of a text.

- The role of literary form and ambiguity in a wellbeing context.

- Recording and reporting the experience of reading, incl. methods from therapeutic practice.

- Comparing reading experiences by mode (e.g., reading vs listening; reading from a screen vs a page; reading vs visual art).

- Connections (both positive and negative) between technology and reading for health.

List of Participants

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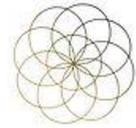
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Appendix 1 - Keynote Address: Professor Philip Davis

Our proceedings opened with a keynote address from Philip Davis, Emeritus Professor of Literature and Psychology at the University of Liverpool where he was Director of the Centre for Research into Reading, Literature and Society (CRILS). Deputy Director of CRILS, Professor Josie Billington, also joined us to share her substantial expertise. In establishing the tone and priorities for our later discussions, Professor Davis drew on a wealth of research at the intersection of reading and health, including his significant work with The Reader and other charitable organisations. Among his numerous publications, recent books on this topic include *Reading for Life* (Oxford University Press, 2020) and *Arts for Health: Reading* (co-authored with Fiona Magee; Emerald Publishing, 2020). The following summary gives a broad sense of Professor Davis's keynote address, though lacking the detail and coherence of the original.

Professor Davis begins his address by quoting William James, the founder of psychology:

> I am against bigness and greatness in all their forms, and with the invisible molecular moral forces that work from individual to individual, stealing in through the crannies of the world like so many soft rootlets, or like the capillary oozing of water, and yet rending the hardest monuments of man's pride, if you give them time. The bigger the unit you deal with, the hollower, the more brutal, the more mendacious is the life displayed. (William James, letter to Mrs Henry Whitman, 7 June 1899)

This quotation allows us to consider some of the problems with big words and categories applied in a top-down fashion. Academic knowledge, divided into discreet disciplines, risks falling into this trap.

However, literary writing is largely uninterested in acts of categorisation and labelling. Davis refers us to Robert Frost's sense of poetry as that which occurs "when an emotion has found its thought". In this sense, a poem is not driven by the substance of thought but by cognitive feelings, including the emotional experience of having a thought.

If this is true of literary writing, a similar case may also be made for the act of literary reading. For Davis, sustained and attentive reading of literature is an intense, open, and emotionally resonant process, allowing the reader to become their own psychologist and their own philosopher. If we wish to understand the experience of reading, we must attend not to abstract theories of literature and cognition, but to the lived, underlying experience of real readers. Following James, Davis prioritises the "molecular forces" at work, whether within the reader or between individuals. Davis encourages us to collapse familiar binaries, whether micro-/macro-, quali-/quanti-, or subjective/objective. Many approaches and forms of knowledge are needed, "stealing in … like so many soft rootlets".

Having focused our attention on reading as an active process instead of an abstract concept, Davis addresses the question of how this process should be studied. James stood for triangulation methods, which suggests that gathering people with different backgrounds and approaches (as we did for this networking event) could be useful. Davis also highlights a recurring problem with gathering responses to specific acts of reading. Since such responses are only descriptions of the reading experience, they tend toward cliché and ambiguity. The language we use to describe experience can never give us first-hand access to the "molecular" reality of the reading experience itself. For Davis, our task is to understand people's experience of reading *as they are reading*. Retroactive accounts such as

questionnaires after the event can only take us a short way, if the unconscious processes of reading are what we aim to study.

In striving to understand reading in its immediacy and specificity, Davis calls attention to what he calls the moment of "it's almost as if…", where cognitive connections are made in response to the literary text. These moments are valuable because of their half-formed directness, by which we speak from conviction, pointing to our experience of the text as it is occurring, rather than describing it secondarily. Connecting this back to James, Davis suggests that the germ of cognition is the word that says the least. Capturing the reading experience on video has offered one method of capturing these instances of insight. By re-watching, participants can see and hear what they themselves were thinking and re-enter that state. People do not always have a language to describe the in-depth mental processes that were occurring. For Davis, the important thing is pointing to the processes and experiences, not necessarily naming them. After all, pinpointing these moments within the reading experience is more useful than ascribing meaning to them from without.

Another consideration for researchers is how to encourage participants to engage enthusiastically with the act of reading. Moreover, if reading is beneficial for health (as the work of Davis and his collaborators suggests), how can we ensure that more people across society read more often? Davis stresses that beneficial reading must arise naturally and not be forced. Perhaps what contributes to health and wellbeing is not reading *ipso facto* but reading for pleasure. In this sense, our object of study is the mental health value of the lived aesthetic experience of engaging with literature or art. Davis posits that reading, like physical exercise, does best when it is pleasurable, intrinsically motivated, and therefore likely to be sustained.

Past research, including Davis's work with national charity, The Reader, has focused on shared reading. Focusing on group settings has allowed researchers to observe readers thinking aloud, in almost involuntary bursts. It has also revealed the potentials of literary reading to act as a social glue. Davis underlines the proven applications of this approach. However, he also acknowledges that the reading tends to be completed first and discussed after, introducing the problem of accessing experience retroactively.

In the final part of his keynote talk, Davis demonstrates an alternative possibility in *Poetry Explorer*, an app which he co-developed with Phil Jimmieson. The app allows readers to make connections between words/phrases within a poem. These connections are presented visually to plot the processes of reading, thinking, and feeling as they occur. The app helps illustrate the ways in which a poem creates meaning. Davis suggests it helps make visible the intuitive act of reading. In the physical act of pointing at connections in the text, Davis suggests we find one instance of direct, unmediated engagement with the reading experience.

In his demonstration of *Poetry Explorer*, and throughout his talk, Davis conceives of reading as more than just the linear process that takes us from left to right of the line, or from start to end of the text. We must think about reading, he suggests, as a process "working in the midst of the poem". From brain imaging to video footage and app usage, modern technologies offer numerous possibilities for approaching the complex workings of reading.

In closing his keynote address, Davis identifies questions for future research and/or for today's discussions:

1) How to gain access to solitary reading and its processes, beyond the context of group reading;

2) How to explore different forms of reading, including non-literary reading. For example, how does reading a poem compare to reading a newspaper?;

3) How to conceive of shared reading as an orchestration of responses to a text, but also as being made up of individual experiences;

4) How to compare the reading experience of a prose sentence and a poem, as different kinds of thought processes;

5) How to pinpoint literary ways of thinking, and how to apply them in non-literary contexts, as an excited state of mind/experience.