

https://dspace.org/

Literary reading as a web of relationships Implications for pedagogy at a South African university

Maria Prozesky; Naomi Nkealah

https://hdl.handle.net/10539/40128
SCOPUS

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

Check for updates

Article

A&H

Arts and Humanities in Higher Education
2024, Vol. 23(3) 233–249
© The Author(s) 2024

Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/14740222241240710
journals.sagepub.com/home/ahh
Sage

Literary reading as a web of relationships: Implications for pedagogy at a South African university

Maria Prozesky and Naomi Nkealah
School of Education, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa

Abstract

We teach English literature in South Africa, to third- or fourth-language English speakers. Increasingly dissatisfied with the effectiveness of our pedagogy under conditions of massification, we seek to agitate propositions about our students' reading and what these propositions means for our pedagogy. Drawing on narrative theory we analyse our students' written responses to a portfolio assessment designed to scaffold their reading of a setwork novel, Lauren Beukes' *Zoo City*. Six patterns emerge, around paraphrase, compensation strategies that replace literary reading, repertoires of knowledge and how these relate to access, personal salience and dissonance, reader discomfort, and de-colonial opportunities. Understanding the students' reading for our course as a complex web of material, social and affective relations opens avenues for pedagogy and assessment design that frames literary reading as communal encounter.

Keywords

Literary reading, literature pedagogy in higher education, decolonizing English literature pedagogy, reading communities, literature education in South Africa, rules of reading

Introduction

We are English lecturers at the school of Education of a large public South African university. English literature has a complex history in South Africa, entangled in the bitter contestations around language and culture that are rooted in colonisation and apartheid,

Corresponding author:
Maria Prozesky, Division of Languages, Literacies and Literatures, Wits School of Education, 27 St Andrews Road, Parktown, Johannesburg 2193, South Africa.
Email: maria.prozesky@wits.ac.za

and continue under globalisation. When we choose and teach English novels, therefore, we engage – consciously or unconsciously – with decisions about what literature is for, which works are worthy of study, and what kinds of reading are important. We perform highly complex negotiations between our own assumptions about these matters, those embedded in the literary texts themselves, and those of our students. This paper recounts preliminary results of our efforts to bring the act of reading as it is practiced in our South African HE classrooms to explicit focus, to help us understand the practical and ethical dimensions of our teaching more fully.

The student body we teach is diverse, and for the vast majority English is a third or fourth language. A significant portion enter university with low levels of academic English literacy (Van Rooy and Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2015) and require support to read English texts effectively. When reading set works, these students draw on complex repertoires of language and literacies, including those related to Indigenous literary traditions entangled with exposure to increasingly global popular culture, alongside practices learned in a schooling system that is still profoundly colonial. As lecturers, then, we find ourselves caught in the access paradox (Janks, 2004), wanting to empower our students by helping them to mastery of English and the cultural capital inherent in its literature, but simultaneously aware that in promoting English and canonical authors such as Shakespeare we are sustaining their hegemonic status. We increasingly feel the need to know how to teach literature to meet the needs of our diverse students as future teachers and non-first-language readers, and also the needs of the larger decolonial moment. However, we are hampered by the large size of our classes, produced by the ongoing massification of the South African HE system, and the distance and anonymity large classes create between lecturer and students.

The focus of this paper is a portfolio assessment we designed, aiming to use weekly reading and writing tasks to scaffold first-year students to read a setwork novel and develop richer and more effective practices of literary reading. Specifically, we examine two tasks from the portfolio, to see what they reveal about how the students are actually reading, the event of reading, and implications for us as teachers of literary reading. The intensely private moment of read*ing* appears in the writing tasks in a range of unpredictable ways, from paraphrase tracing a student's pleasure in managing to make sense of a complex passage, to a focus on unusual details that reference a specific moment of salience when the reader finds his or her interests reflected in the text, or moments of failure when the text's demands exceed the reader's repertoire. The writing tasks thus function, for us as lecturers, as unruly encounters with the individuality of our students, even across the faceless space of asynchronous online interaction and in answers which would count as "failed" reading. This investigation is part of an ongoing action research cycle. As teacher-researchers, therefore, we think about this research not as a process of "gathering data" about our students and the writing they produce as static and static texts, but rather of "becoming entangled in relations" (Springgay and Truman, 2018: p. 204) between identities, texts, discourses, materials and actions (Campano et al., 2020: p. 256). Embedded in our enquiry as we are, we do not aim to come to firm conclusions but rather to agitate propositions, in the sense developed by Alfred Whitehead, of "tales that perhaps might be told about particular actualities" (1978: p. 256). A proposition therefore can be

seen "as both actual and speculative. … propositions do not give information as to how they function in concrete instances but gesture to how they could potentialize" (Truman and Springgay, 2016: p. 259). These propositions are catalysts for future movements in our pedagogy, theorising and research, our thinking-making-doing as teachers and researchers of literature in our specific context. Our students' reading for our course emerges as a complex web of material, social and affective relations, a better understanding of which opens avenues for pedagogy and assessment design that frames literary reading as communal encounter.

In the sections that follow, we describe the course and the portfolio assessment, and then give a brief literature review setting out how we theorise literary reading. Our methodology is then discussed, followed by analysis and discussion of the students' writing tasks.

The course

The module is called "Literature in South Africa," and is part of the English 1 course taken by first-year Bachelor of Education students. The 7-week module covers an introduction to poetry and a novel, *Zoo City* by Lauren Beukes (2010), which is the focus of this paper. In 2020 there were 330 students in the class, and due to the COVID-19 pandemic, our teaching was online. Students watched pre-recorded video lecturers and read the prescribed text. With no synchronous interaction possible due to data restrictions, students completed eight asynchronous scaffolded weekly reading and writing tasks online, designed to help them finish the novel, develop their close reading skills, and deepen their engagement with the novel's critique of post-apartheid South African society. The final assessment consisted of portfolio submissions of selected tasks.

Literature review and theoretical framework

Reading as social practice

Our model of reading is situated within the tradition of sociocultural perspectives on literacy (see e.g. Perry, 2012; Street, 1984). We see reading as a social practice, a set of purposeful strategies that change depending on situation, context and text. As Long puts it, these strategies are subject to varied social and institutional forces that shape "what's available to read, what is 'worth reading', and how to read it" (1992: p.193, cited in Allington and Swann, 2009: p. 220). In a particular moment of reading, the individual negotiates these determinants in interplay with her own needs, purposes and desires in that reading act, and her own (Moje et al., 2004). Mackey describes this as the weighing of how "personal salience" – the question of whether the text is saying something the reader is interested in hearing – measures up against "fluency of access" – how easy or difficult it will be for the reader to gain access to that meaning (2007: p. 16). Access requires language- and discourse-focused tasks such as decoding alphabetic words and recognizing meanings dependent on generic conventions (Rose, 2015: p. 174), and actively selecting among the clues coming from the page in relation to knowledge of the world and

concepts and schemas already stored in the memory (Granville, 2001). Reading also involves physical access to the text in whichever material mode it takes (oral, printed, digital, for example), social access to the infrastructures that make this possible, and the embodied skills required to manipulate the mode (for example how to use the touch screen of a smartphone). Reading thus involves reader, context and text, in other words, meaning-making that is linguistic, social, embodied and affective.

Literary reading

Literary reading is a particular case within the general notion of reading, and the *reading of fictional narrative* is a specific subset within literary reading. For the purposes of this paper, which focuses on the students' reading of a novel, we use the term "literary reading" to refer to this limited and specific kind of reading. In South African English literature classes, the term "literary reading" is also used assuming a particular cultural context, the broad Anglo-European tradition of written literary narratives, which comes with assumptions about the stances a reader takes towards the text, the discourse conventions authors employ, and the repertoires of interpretive moves the reader brings to a text.

Well established traditions of reader response theory and sociocultural literacy theory explore how the meanings of a text emerge in dynamic ways with the active involvement of the reader who negotiates the text drawing on his or her funds of knowledge and repertoires of discourse, learned in a range of reading communities over the course of the years leading up to that reader's entry to university. To decolonise our teaching, we must allow students to actively bring English literary texts into confrontation with the students' diverse funds of knowledge drawing from Indigenous, settler and popular cultures. While teachers in HE, including in South Africa, have historically tended to teach fixed meanings, specifically in relation to 'the canon', this kind of pedagogy has been increasingly dismantled by practitioners who opt to teach in a way that develops in students a flexibility and range of reading across genres and cultural traditions, critical acumen, tolerance for complex and ambiguous meanings, and openness to new ideas and experiences (Gibson, 2017; Miller, 2002). Since our students are prospective teachers of reading themselves, we also want them to develop sensitive metacognitive awareness of both immersive and critical reading as they are happening, without destroying the bloom of the moment-by-moment pleasure of literature or rendering the students' varied funds of linguistic and cultural knowledge invisible and devalued.

To better understand the interpretive moves that fictional narratives demand from readers, particularly readers working across cultural differences, we draw on Rabinowitz's notion of authorial and narrative audiences. The authorial reader or audience is not a "perfect" reader whose interpretive moves are universal, but rather the specific situated "reader this particular author wrote for [with specific] beliefs, engagements, commitments, prejudices, and stampedings of pity and terror" (Rabinowitz, 1998: pp. 26–27). Both authorial intention *and* the author's unconsciously held cultural worldsense will determine the authorial audience. "Reading in the authorial audience, then, involves not an effort to decipher the writer's individual conscious intention but an effort to determine

which conventions the writer is working with or against" (Phelan, 1998: p. xiv). If a reader shares this repertoire of cultural assumptions, and so can detect when the author is conforming to them and when playing with or against them, the reader will experience the text as the author intended.

Whereas all text types have authorial audiences. Rabinowitz argues that fictional narratives have a second type of reader too, the audience *within the fictional world* for whom the narrator of the story is telling it. The successful reader of a fictional narrative pretends to be a member of this narrative audience. So for example, "the narrative audience of Cinderella accepts the existence of fairy godmothers (although the authorial audience does not share this belief). A reader who refuses to pretend to share that belief will see Cinderella as a psychotic young woman subject to hallucinations" (Rabinowitz, 1998: p. 98). The authorial and narrative audiences of a text can be closer or farther apart, to different effect: a novel in the realist tradition set in the present has authorial and narrative audiences that are nearly identical, for example. As a speculative fantasy, our course's set work, *Zoo City*, employs this gap between authorial and narrative audiences in a genre-specific way. The narrative audience are sophisticated readers familiar with the vibrant cultures of multilingual multi-ethnic African cities, in an alternate universe where someone responsible for the death of another human being is punished by being "animalled", that is, magically bonded to an animal familiar that is visible to everyone around them. The authorial audience are sophisticated urban readers whose distance from this alternate universe allows them to recognise that the prejudice the "zoos" or animalled characters encounter in this other Johannesburg explores the dynamics of racism and coloniality in contemporary South African society. Our teaching of the novel uses theory around racial "othering" and prejudice to explore this central metaphor.

In Rabinowitz's terms, the "success" of an instance of literary reading thus depends on the degree to which an individual reading the fictional narrative fills the roles of the authorial and narrative audiences. Rabinowitz provides a framework of conventions, the "rules" of reading, by which the author of a literary narrative signals to the authorial audience how they are to transform text into meaning. These rules form a kind of socially constructed, implicit contract between author and reader, and they vary "with genre, culture, history, and text" (Rabinowitz, 1998: p. 43). Rabinowitz notes that readers do not always apply these rules as authors intend them to, even if they are trying to, but concludes, "*in our culture* virtually all readers apply some rules … whenever they approach a text (1998, p. 43, my emphasis).

When Rabinowitz says "in our culture", he speaks to his own authorial audience, which is a reader deeply embedded in the Anglo-European tradition of print literary fiction. Most of our students encounter this tradition, within which *Zoo City* falls, only at school. Rabinowitz's notion of authorial and narrative audience, and Mackey's of the competing claims of salience and access, help to explain what we as teachers of literature assume as the zero ground, as it were, of advanced literary study, namely the ability to read the whole text and arrive at a good general approximation of these two audiences. More sophisticated, theoretically supported interpretive readings build on this ground, which itself is built on successful literal comprehension in English. As mentioned in the introduction, we as lecturers cannot assume that our students come to university with this

basic grounding in literary reading in English. We are also largely ignorant of the resources and repertoires they bring to their efforts to do so, and the exact nature of the cultural and epistemological differences which impede these efforts. Rabinowitz's "rules" are useful in allowing us to describe the interpretive moves the novel *expects* students to make, so that we can explore the extent to which they are successfully accessing the text at this basic level. Understanding their comprehension and interpretation moves better can guide us as teachers, as we plan and perform more locally responsive and equitable literary pedagogies.

Methodology: Reading-in-talk

In this study, we see the students' writing tasks as traces of their reading processes. The writing tasks are "the public manifestations of a private experience," the students' reading (Mackey, 2007: p. 28), and a specific kind of very mediated public manifestation at that. This private experience consists of activities – read*ing* and text process*ing* – that are "indeterminate and contingent *while they are going on*" no matter how they are ultimately presented in public manifestation (Mackey, 2007: p. 29). Myers argues that the reading act is not *prior* to talking (or writing) about the text but rather must be understood as "reading-in-talk." Readers

> … are engaged prospectively in social encounters from the moment they pick up the new book and open the cover. We can use those social encounters … to find out what people talk about, how they use their reading to define themselves and the person to whom they are talking, and the place and purpose of reading. (2009, p. 338)

Analysing our students' writing tasks as "reading-in-talk" allows us to make allowances for these shaping factors as we trace their meaning-making moves.

For this paper we analyse two tasks that require the students to read specific passages closely and develop interpretations of events, characters or narrative arcs, because these tasks give us the closest access to the students' moment-by-moment acts of meaning-making. When the module was complete and the students had received their final marks, we sent all the students in the class (330 students) participant information sheets and consent forms via their student emails, and included in the study the work of all those students who returned completed consent forms (70 in total). We analysed the students' tasks using constant comparative analysis, in which we used the rules of reading as a conceptual framework guiding the iterative, inductive coding.

Analysis and discussion

The briefness of the portfolio tasks seems to have encouraged many students to submit them unedited, emphasising their nature as snapshots of momentary engagements with the text – of the elusive event of read*ing* discussed in the theoretical framework. These tasks read like moments of intensity, throwing up insights into the eventing nature of the students' signify*ing*. Through these moments, the reader appears in embodied specificity,

as their writing tasks reveal unexpected lines of thought and response agitated by the passages set for the writing tasks, by what becomes salient for each reader. When the students' words are quoted below, the original spelling and punctuation are retained, but we replace the students' names with pseudonyms. We discuss the patterns emerging, and then offer a series of propositions for thinking about how to improve our teaching.

"Filling in" and paraphrase

In the Anglo-European tradition of literature teaching, the kind of reading-in-talk which is called paraphrase, that is, retelling the story in your own words, is judged as inferior. As lecturers our instinct is to train the students out of this kind of writing and into discussing the text at a more abstract and interpretive level. Rabinowitz's rules help us to understand paraphrase as practicing one of the basic rules of signifying, "license to fill". According to this rule, if a gap in the text can be filled in satisfactorily by assumptions that unproblematically follow the course of everyday life either within the reader's own external world or within the narrative world, then the reader can simply fill the gap in this way (Rabinowitz, 1998: pp. 151–152). Many students answer the tasks by moving through the passage phrase by phrase, explaining the implied details and logical links of character, motivation, action or consequence. Mandla for example moves through a passage involving a rapid exchange of speech turns sentence by sentence, glossing unfamiliar words and tracing the unfolding signification with verbal markers in his own writing ("and", "then", "asks", "answers"). His "filling in" enables him to make basic sense of the conversation and its links to the unfolding plot. Such paraphrasing is actually a trace of the complexities required by literary reading, as when the reader "fills in" according to the speculative logic of the text's reality, working out what would happen if the phenomenon of animalling really did exist. In these acts of literary reading, "filling in" is the active performance of the narrative audience role, in which the reader grasps the logic of the speculative world and fleshes out its details.

Proposition

- As markers we are not prepared for such answers, since the 'traditional' literary pedagogy we experienced at university and were trained in through apprenticeship assumes that students can read English fluently and so move on to analysis and interpretation, with paraphrase a step of the reading process that remains invisible in written work. Our instinct is to mark these answers as "failed" literary readings. We have to reconsider how we mark, how to reward readings such as Mandla's appropriately, while also scaffolding their access to accepted academic reading and writing about literature, in our future redesign of the course and its assessment. This process of "unlearning' elitist traditions of literary study is central to our efforts, as lecturers, to transform our teaching politically in the postcolonial context of South Africa, given how powerful assessment is in gatekeeping students' 'success' at university.

Compensation strategies

In what he calls the "rule of realism", Rabinowitz points out that novels can expect their readers to make inferences about characters and actions because there are "at least some points at which the novel's inner world – the world of the narrative audience – is congruent with the world of the authorial audience" (1998: p. 101). Many students skirt the difficulties of *Zoo City*'s speculative features by focusing on these "realistic" details. Thabo discusses a passage from Chapter 1 where a murder has occurred, and the main character, Zinzi, is taken in for questioning; the scene is particularly significant in setting up the murder mystery plot of the novel. But rather than showing awareness of plot, Thabo deduces the power dynamics of the scene in the police station by drawing inferences from real-world knowledge of the power and status of police officers:

> The words that are used to show the unequal balance of power is with "me and Inspector Tshabalala". This words shows that all people like Zinzi are considered the other in to be less powerful in zoo city and the inspector have a lot of power because of the usage of the words that show which positions she is in at work. The other reason that shows the unequal balance of power is that the inspector is being called by her last name which show some kind of respect that she gets.

He mentions the term "other" from the theory taught in lectures, but confuses the pronouns used by a first-person narrator for the "us" versus "them" language of prejudice. Thabo has not joined the authorial or narrative audience of the passage by following its contributions to plot, but builds an understanding that has small-scale coherence restricted to this particular scene and its setting, and specific details and phrases within the passage that he feels he understands.

Propositions

- The structure of the portfolio tasks, which of necessity are fairly short, seem to exacerbate the tendency to small-scale reading. The students are reading actively, relating what they find on the page with their funds of knowledge, to make meaning. However, the status of these small-scale *interim* interpretations and specifically whether they build towards an overall "successful" reading of the whole novel and a personal and intellectual engagement with its fictional world, which was the aim of the portfolio tasks, is unclear.
- This group of students may not have read the novel, or they may be so profoundly unfamiliar with the speculative genre that they do not make the interpretive moves necessary to notice and put together the speculative elements in the text, despite the support we offer in class discussion. Their low comprehension levels in written English may also hamper their noticing of these elements. The extent of the literature lecturer's ethical responsibility becomes problematic, in such a context. Supporting students' basic comprehension is not regularly included among the duties of literature lecturers at tertiary level, but to remain consistent with our deeper emancipatory aims arguably we must build such remedial support into our

pedagogy and curriculum design. As Springgay and Truman would put it, the web of relationships, roles and duties within which we see ourselves expands.

- It is probable that students develop these compensatory strategies as learners in poorly resourced schools, who have been shown to employ a range of highly agentic practices to overcome the "absence of adequate schooling" and their consequently low literacy levels (Kapp, 2017: p. 18). The prevalence of these strategies in the students' answers suggests that we as lecturers need to make time in the curriculum to talk about reading as difficult and to refocus the students' attention on their literary reading experiences rather than the 'answer' they expect to produce. In listening to what the students tell us about their difficulties, we can work out how to support their reading better without negating their agency as problem-solving readers and writers.

Repertoires and access

As Mackey shows, however, access also depends on the reader's repertoires. In terms of literary conventions, *Zoo City* makes particular demands on its readers due to its nature as a postmodern text that extensively uses pastiche and plays with genre. Readers must be able to apply a range of appropriate rules and notice moving between them. This poses a challenge when students' funds of knowledge and repertoire of reading practices do not match those of the authorial audience. In terms of funds of knowledge, a novel that features a sophisticated urban narrator, multiple settings across the frenetically diverse spaces and places of a vibrant globalising city such as Johannesburg, and dozens of swiftly changing minor characters, requires readers with broad and eclectic enough funds of knowledge to find points of connection to join the authorial audience. A passage from Chapter 30 for example, employs glancing references to Britney Spears, Eminem and "that freaky vampire guy with the weird eyes" (which we take to be Marilyn Manson) and the idiomatic term "gaydar", none of which reappears anywhere else in the novel. Students find idiomatic terms such as "good old fashioned medicine" or "it's very now" particularly troublesome. Other particularly difficult examples involve slang that acts as a discourse marker locating a passage in a particular context – when reading the passage from Chapter 10, for example, Holly struggles with the urban US dialect used by the third speaker, a prisoner in California's Corcoran jail. She correctly understands the term "bad ass" but is confused by "niggas", taking it as a term of abuse directed at animalled people within the narrative world of the novel.

Propositions

- Course and assessment designs must take into account the diversity of students' repertoires of knowledge and discourse, in relation to those expected of the authorial audience. We cannot try to gloss whole texts for the students. Differentiated teaching may be needed to support students who struggle to varying degrees with reading in English, or with the "rules" of narration on which the set text depends. Given the constraints of large class sizes, this may perhaps be achieved best by drawing the students into reading groups, where they can pool their knowledge and

support each other's reading. As lecturers we need to confront the vulnerability of our position, ignorant of the exact topography of our students' repertoires and gaps, while simultaneously being responsible for fostering their growth as readers and teachers of literature in English.

- The perennial question of whether the students should find the set text *relatable* is relevant here. The almost manic eclecticism of *Zoo City* contributes to the pleasure of the text, and its ability to speak to readers from across South Africa's diverse ethnic and linguistic communities, as our students comment every year. However, the text's demands in terms of general knowledge may lower its fluency of access for our students so far that they cannot relate to it and so retreat into reading only the extracts required for the writing tasks, or looking for summaries online. Rather than looking for 'simpler' novels, we must find ways to make the difficulty of *Zoo City* an opportunity to talk about intercultural competence with the students, helping them locate themselves as literary readers (and as future teachers of literary reading) within the praxis of linguistic and epistemic justice that is core to our teaching philosophy. Texts should not be restricted to what is "relatable", a concept which has little traction considering the hyperdiverse classes we teach.

Salience, pleasure and dissonance

"Filling in" is one of the central pleasures of speculative fiction for those who enjoy the genre, and Beukes' text offers an abundance of exuberant details which students navigate according to personal salience. Stefan, for example, chooses to discuss a passage where characters play a computer game "*Grand Theft Auto VI: Zootopia*," an imagined edition of the series famous for using extreme violence as a selling point. He says:

> … [A]s described by Zinzi there is a "huge black guy character with Mike Tyson tattoos on his face and whipblades mounted in his forearms." This extract shows how the game developers care very little for the image of zoos and merely apply a generalized view to their character to make zoos as criminals look intimidating and scary just for the sake of marketing the game.

Stefan extrapolates, from Zinzi's glancing comment, what motives would guide the game developers looking to create terrifying characters for the game. Mackey notes that how "we flesh out the affective qualities of a particular fictional moment out of our own repertoire of memories and experiences is one of those relationships that makes reading personal as well as social" (2007: p. 158). Our design of the writing tasks does seem to have opened space for some students to do this kind of "fleshing out" based on their own interests, as Stefan does. The students' embodied lives, and the socio-material contexts of their lives, surface in these reading moments, as details in the text become salient according to how they resonate with each reader's funds of knowledge.

Here are extracts from Fundiswa's answer to task 1, discussing a passage from Chapter 8:

> "Do not bring a detestable thing into your house" this is kind of othering that elevate oneself and make oneself better than others. This until you see them as filthy and unfit to be called human beings because they come from shacks or ghetto where it is dirty and dangerous where they are plagued by poverty and hunger fitting them in a group of animals as they are called thing. The words "God is merciful, but only to actual, genuine, REAL LIFE human beings" are boosting words with boosting tone of a people who see themselves pure in the face of the creator and are more acceptable than others pretending to be righteous thinking that God thinks like them.

Fundiswa's points link to ideas from the theory around prejudice and othering taught in class, but she does not mention the novel's central metaphor of animalling, or the immediate context of this passage, which is an extract from an online chat forum. She has joined the narrative audience of neither the novel as a whole nor this text-within-a-text (who would be the readers of the chat forum whom the virulently anti-zoo poster addresses). She builds a reading that has small-scale coherence internal to the phrases she selects for comment. But striking in Fundiswa's answer is how it registers a moment of intensity in her reading process, in which the biblical language used by the writer of the post sparks a connection with what is salient for Fundiswa, her religious faith and her sharp sense of the social injustices of poverty. Rhetorically she slips into heightened register herself in phrases such as "who see themselves pure in the face of the creator". Fundiswa's is also a moment of dissonance between her personal faith (many of our students are strongly religious) and the postmodern cynicism of the novel's narrator, an incommensurability of viewpoints which manifests to us (as markers) as a "failed" reading.

Proposition

- Examples of such revealing flashes, traces of the invisible reading events that constitute a student's moment-by-moment encounter with the text as they move through it (or at least dip into it), are valuable to us as lecturers striving to overcome the anonymity of large classes. They are snapshots of the eventing nature of the students' reading, their diversity as a group and the precariousness of the lecturer's position under conditions of massification and remote teaching. Such moments of intensity are opportunities for discussing questions of salience in literary reading, the role of pleasure, interest and excitement in experiencing a novel, and what to do when you find a literary text morally repellent on a personal level.

Discomfort

Partly because of *Zoo City*'s *noir* style, but also because of its setting in the South African context, the political violence of racism, xenophobia and homophobia surfaces regularly in such moments of intensity, in the details the students notice and the signification they place on them even if the overall reading "fails" in Rabinowitz's sense. Discussing a set passage from Chapter 30, for example, Blessing focuses almost exclusively on the casual stereotyping of homosexual people as her example of prejudice and othering. Sanele is sensitive to xenophobic overtones, when she chooses her own passage to discuss but

writes only one sentence about it: "The other case of othering is where Zinzi was describing the man Who coughing, she called them Zimbabwean instead of calling them man, so this shows that she was discriminating". The experiences Sanele's answer hints at, which motivate her choice of a tiny detail in the text, are powerfully present even though unstated. The diversity of the ethnically coded, racialised bodies in the class appears in the diversity of answers. Siphiwe inappropriately applies an apartheid frame to interpret a passage from Chapter 10 by saying:

> Paragraph 2 also shows racism between the people the Pakistan here is being beaten for something he did not do … he was just walking so he beaten by police it also brings us back to the apartheid era how blacks or people treated in the pas[t].

Daniella comes from the opposite end of the spectrum when she interprets a passage from Chapter 14 involving the unglossed IsiZulu word for white people, *umlungu*, which in slang use can be a mildly derogatory term. Her tone, slightly defensive, surfaces currents of white fragility which we as lecturers encounter regularly in our classrooms. The writing tasks, which allow deeply held ideological commitments and remembered traumas to become visible in the reading act, thus involve us as lecturers in levels of ethical responsibility that staying safely with "close reading" keeps at a comfortable distance.

Proposition

- Like incommensurability, discomfort has a powerful shaping effect on students' encounter with the text. As teachers of literature we have to think about the extent to which we will respond to the ethical imperative of "bear[ing] the consequences for the things that are not even known yet" (Springgay and Truman, 2018: p. 210), which the students encounter because of the text we set as lecturers, and our pedagogical focus on personal reading and interpretation. How to manage charged discussions responsibly in limited class time with large student groups remains a challenge.

Decolonial opportunities

These are also moments when knowledges often invisible in English literature classrooms and in academic spaces can appear. Interpreting a description of a picture of a scapegoat, for example, Lesedi draws on her personal repertoire of knowledge saying,

> based on how [Dr Auerbach, the character in this scene] talks about throwing the sins out into the wilderness to die Suggests that she is western and believes that sins can be taken out of someone and taken to the wilderness, usually Traditional healers take people to the bush or wilderness to remove evil spirits and they leave them there so they don't get mixed up with people and also to avoid problem in the persons life, so basically, Dr Auerbach has a sense of knowledge about indigenous knowledge and beliefs.

Although Lesedi's reading "fails" in terms of correctly following the passage's meaning, what is significant is that she draws on her personal fund of Indigenous knowledge to engage with the text. The task's scaffolding seems to give permission to students to enact identities which they label as African, though sometimes in essentialising ways. Discussing the same passage, Amogelang for example overstates an insignificant detail, saying, "when Dr Auerbach shakes Zinzi's hands, this is the way we understand the African way of greeting". Though these may be "failed" readings, they are also moments when the students' location on an intercultural borderland allows them to "negotiate and appropriate the reading events" (Martínez-Roldán and Sayer, 2006) in evolving ways.

Proposition

- Another ethical responsibility involves finding ways to let the students' knowledges into the classroom as powerful knowledge (Christie and McKinney, 2017: p. 2), as part of the work of decolonising our classrooms. The assessments we design can divert the institutional capital of grades to validate Indigenous knowledge, rather than only more established colonial knowledge, in academic spaces.
- Teacher educators have a particular importance in decolonising education systems, since we are able to support both Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers to recognise their involvement with and accountability for moving education towards the priorities and solutions of local Indigenous traditions (Ma Rhea and Russell, 2012). Given the diversity and simultaneous anonymity of our large classes, our pedagogical design must incorporate flexibility if we are to remain responsive to the shifting positionalities of each year's cohort.

Conclusion: Moving forward

The students' writing tasks emerge in our reading of them as the kinds of "social encounters" Myers describes (Myers, 2009: p. 338). They are traces of the "reading-in-talk" that reveal what the students choose to write about, and how they use their reading to define themselves as students and readers, and us as lecturers and markers. What appears unequivocally in both successful and unsuccessful readings is the irreducibly interactive nature of reading, as the students draw on their individual repertoires and funds of knowledge, on their lived, embodied experiences, to make meaning from the text.

A focus on reading therefore brings to view with unavoidable clarity what diversity means for us as teachers in a public university in a postcolony. Each student's capacity to arrive at a "correct" basic reading of the novel, to join the authorial and narrative audiences, could be plotted at the intersection of multiple vectors: access to a physical or electronic copy of the novel and a safe, clean study space in which to read it; basic comprehension in English; facility with the "rules" of western narrative fiction; repertoires of literacies, knowledges, languages and academic discourse; embodied experience and cultural memory. Using a portfolio assessment that shows the students' engagement over time and across the novel, rather than a more traditional analysis essay at the end of the course, makes more visible to us how dense the "entangle[ment] in relations"

(Springgay and Truman, 2018: p. 204) is within which our students' reading must be understood. The affective impact of this diversity on us as teaching staff is to bring home to us our vulnerability in terms of just how partial our knowledge of our students is, the discomfort of trying to anticipate their difficulties and strengths, over against the power our position in the institution gives us, particularly our power over assessment and marking. The tension between these two redefines our agency and ethical responsibility as lecturers who desire to be responsive to our particular context.

More positively, however, this space of unknowing can be conceptualized as rich with potential for shifting the ground of the students' reading as social encounter, so that the portfolio tasks become opportunities for students to perform themselves as "readers talking together" rather than "students writing for markers". Given the conditions of massification under which we work, the possibilities for such a shift lie in curriculum and assessment design, centred on a conception of learning interactions as a series of spaces for individual readers (both students and lecturers) to encounter the novel and each other as fellows within a community of readers. The portfolio design must decentre "answers to questions" to allow "readers" to appear, rather than "students", and class discussions must include explicit discussion, modelling and scaffolding of different kinds of reading: immersive reading for pleasure as well as slow "close reading", reading across genres such as poetry and novels, reading across literary traditions. Writing tasks could explicitly require "response statements" that ask students to record their immediate, unstructured responses (Gibson, 2017), and employ creative writing or multimodal avenues for such tasks, so as to draw on the students' multiple literacies. Another avenue would be to instruct students to first paraphrase and then analyse a passage, and then reflect on the differences between these "narrative" and "paradigmatic" kinds of writing. Online annotation software could be used in tasks that allow students to annotate for each other, as well as the lecturer, and require them to actively seek out classmates with complementary repertoires of cultural knowledge in jigsaw-type tasks that draw on the resources of their diverse funds of knowledge. This shifts the burden of responsibility for glossing the text from the lecturer to the broader class community.

This ideal of a reading community raises the matter of validation as well as visibility. The portfolio assessment in its current form prioritises making the students' reading visible to lecturers, but given the class size, the momentary glimpses that are granted over the weeks largely remain unseen until the final submission. The rich variousness of our students' diverse bodies cannot be adequately represented by marks in a learning management system (LMS) gradebook, and so remains largely invisible in our current assessment. A shift is needed in our understanding of whose gaze can both validate students' creative responses and also redirect them if they stray too far from the authorial or narrative audience. The course design must create smaller communities, of peers, tutorial groups, reading buddies, where they can reflect each other's reading back to their fellows, and learn to reflect on their own reading and writing. These communities can be formed on the LMS or on social media, as well as in tutorial rooms. Such course design can also support students' agency, as they take charge of their reading and learning, and can actively plan to find support if they need it. Douglas et al. (2016) in Australia found that these conversations take place productively outside class time, before the course

starts, so podcasts or social media posts that reach the students outside the university's LMS may be useful for initiating this work. Students will need support to develop their skills of judgement and reflection; exemplars and rubrics will be necessary tools for helping them generate internal feedback (Nicol, 2019), within smaller communities of care that can provide the safe spaces needed for effective reflection (Gachago et al., 2022). Within such spaces students can also move more freely between the multiple languages of their linguistic repertoires, rather than be restricted to the English as *lingua franca* that of necessity we use in lectures and shared online discussion boards. In this way, the cultural and linguistic diversity of the class can become realised as a resource rather than an impediment to finding a "relatable" set text.

Perhaps the most challenging proposition is that as lecturers of literature we need to acknowledge the broader web of relationships in which we find ourselves. As teachers of English literature at a university where English is the language of teaching and learning, we are ideally positioned to drive institutional change towards more reading support; we cannot leave this up to university writing programs, or to the students alone. Our pedagogy and curriculum design must expand to include active teaching of strategies for literal and inferential comprehension, the basics of literary reading including relevant "rules" of reading for the genre we are teaching, and intercultural competence.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Wits University Capacity Development Grant SoTL Project (2021).

ORCID iD

Maria Prozesky https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9747-037X

References

Allington D and Swann J (2009) Researching literary reading as social practice. *Language and Literature: International Journal of Stylistics* 18(3): 219–230. DOI: 10.1177/0963947009105850.

Campano G, Nichols TP, and Player GD (2020) Multimodal critical inquiry: nurturing decolonial imaginaries. *Handbook of Reading Research*. New York & London: Routledge, 137–152.

Christie P and McKinney C (2017) Decoloniality and "Model C" schools: ethos, language and the protests of 2016. *Education As Change* 21(3): 1–21.

Douglas K, Barnett T, Poletti A, et al. (2016) Building reading resilience: re-thinking reading for the literary studies classroom. *Higher Education Research and Development* 35(2): 254–266. DOI: 10.1080/07294360.2015.1087475.

Gachago D, Bali M, and Pallitt N (2022) Compassionate learning design as a critical approach to instructional design. In: Burtis M, Jhangiani S, and Quinn J (eds) *Towards a Critical Instructional Design. Hybrid Pedagogy*. Montreal: Pressbook.

Gibson J (2017) Beyond the essay? Assessment and English literature. In: Knights B (ed) *Teaching Literature: Text and Dialogue in the English Classroom*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 99–114.

Granville S (2001) Comprehension or comprehending? Using Critical Language Awareness and interactive reading theory to teach learners to interact with texts. *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies* 19(1–2): 13–21. DOI: 10.2989/16073610109486272.

Janks H (2004) The access paradox. *Literacy Learning: The Middle Years* 12(1): 33–42. DOI: 10.3316/aeipt.133852.

Kapp R (2017) Students' negotiation of learning and identity in working-class schooling. In: Bangeni B and Kapp R (eds) *Negotiating Learning and Identity in Higher Education: Access, Persistence and Retention*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 17–29.

Ma Rhea Z and Russell L (2012) The invisible hand of pedagogy in Australian Indigenous studies and Indigenous education. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* 41(1): 18–25. DOI: 10.1017/jie.2012.4.

Mackey M (2007) *Literacies across Media: Playing the Text*. 2nd edition. London: Routledge.

Martínez-Roldán CM and Sayer P (2006) Reading through linguistic borderlands: latino students' transactions with narrative texts. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy* 6(3): 293–322. DOI: 10.1177/1468798406069799.

Miller JH (2002) *On Literature*. London; New York: Routledge. (Thinking in action).

Moje EB, Ciechanowski KM, Kramer K, et al. (2004) Working toward third space in content area literacy: an examination of everyday funds of knowledge and discourse. *Reading Research Quarterly* 39(1): 38–70.

Myers G (2009) Stylistics and "reading-in-talk". *Language and Literature* 18(3): 334–338.

Nicol D (2019) Reconceptualising feedback as an internal not an external process. *Italian Journal of Educational Research* 12: 71–84.

Perry K (2012) What is literacy? A critical overview of sociocultural perspectives. *The Journal of Language & Literacy Education* 8(1): 50–71.

Phelan J (1998) Foreword: before reading on its own terms. In: Rabinowitz PJ (ed) *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation*. 2nd edition. Columbus: Ohio State University Press

Rabinowitz PJ (1998) *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation*. 2nd edition. Columbus: Ohio State University Press (The theory and interpretation of narrative.

Rose D (2015) Myth making and meaning making: the school and indigenous children. *Multimodality and Governmentality: Negotiating Spaces in Literacy Curricula across Domains*. London: Continuum, 167–184.

Springgay S and Truman SE (2018) On the need for methods beyond proceduralism: speculative middles, (In)Tensions, and response-ability in research. *Qualitative Inquiry* 24(3): 203–214. DOI: 10.1177/1077800417704464.

Street BV (1984) *Literacy in Theory and Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Truman SE and Springgay S (2016) Propositions for walking research. In: Burnard P, Mackinlay E, and Powell K (eds) *Routledge International Handbook of Intercultural Arts Research*. London; New York: Routledge, 259–267.

van Rooy B and Coetzee-Van Rooy S (2015) The language issue and academic performance at a South African University. *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies* 33(1): 31–46. DOI: 10.2989/16073614.2015.1012691.

Whitehead AN (1978) *Process and Reality*. New York: Free Press.

Author biographies

Maria Prozesky is a senior lecturer of English and literacy in the Division of Languages, Literacies and Literatures of the University of the Witwatersrand's School of Education in Johannesburg. Her research specializes in reading and literature pedagogies, decolonization of higher education pedagogies, and African speculative fiction.

Naomi Nkealah is a senior lecturer of English in the Division of Languages, Literacies and Literatures in the School of Education at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. She teaches courses in Shakespearean drama, modern South African drama and African feminist literature. Her research specializes in African feminisms and critical pedagogies for English education. She is co-editor of the book *Gendered Violence and Human Rights in Black World Literature and Film* (Routledge, 2021), co-edited with distinguished professor, Obioma Nnaemeka.