

Conference on Literacy, Empathy and Social Sustainability 2017

PRESENTATION SUMMARIES

Jonas Asklund (Halmstad University)

“Achieving the Meta-cognitive Awareness in a School Book Discussion”

Discussions about books and ways of reading play an important role in the curriculum of the Swedish secondary school system. In an intervention study based on a series of book discussions on an easy reader novel, I looked into the possible cooperation between students, their teacher in the introduction program for newcomers and the school librarian. Based on my function as a teacher educator and drawing on current research in literature didactics, I planned six discussions where different reading strategies, methods and models were used. The main concern was to discuss the cognitive and emotional response to the story we shared, but also to reflect upon the way these discussions were held. This presentation is based on the results of subsequent interviews with the students, the teacher, and the school librarian. In contrast to survey beliefs of the relative unimportance librarians place on their own participation, the results indicate that the leader of the group discussion plays an important role in terms of helping the participants to shift between emotional and cognitive perspectives. To ensure that the book discussion can become a social practice that enhances democratic values, equal stress must be placed on the way we talk about books and on the way we read them.

Matthijs Bal (University of Lincoln)

“Does Fiction Really Tell Us Something about Our Working Lives?”

There is increasing evidence that reading fiction may help us to develop our empathetic skills. It stimulates imagination and fantasy and may help to sympathize with other people. Moreover, it may also help to accept the ambiguity of life. However, there is also rising critique on empathy, and particularly on the exclusiveness of empathy towards people within in-groups. This presentation poses the fundamental question whether fiction really has any meaning in social life, and particularly in workplace behaviors. It explores the conditions under which fiction may either sustain or contradict existing positions and views in society, and how it may contribute to more dignified workplaces. Finally, the presentation will offer some insights into how fiction can be used in our daily working lives.

Katarina Eriksson Barajas & Anja Rydén Gramner (Linköping University)

“Fiction as a Didactic Tool in Medical Education”

The overarching aim of the proposed project is to increase our understanding of the fundamental conditions regarding the uses and functions of fiction as a didactic tool in professional education, with a specific focus on medical training. The tradition of using fiction in the medical curriculum comes from researchers in medical humanities who argued that fiction could develop empathy, understanding of others and a heightened ability to analyse patients’ narratives. The existing empirical data, though, show only what kind of texts and assignments are used, and what the students themselves, or the teachers, think of the assignments.

During this talk, we will present data from video recordings of medical students discussing fiction in a medical school in Sweden. Students are participants of base groups and have six seminars, three per semester, together with their tutor, and during each seminar, they discuss one work of fiction (novels, short stories, poetry and film). Participation is mandatory but they are not graded on their efforts. Our empirical data will be analysed using a discursive psychology approach, where social phenomena are seen as being constructed in interaction. Our interest lies in trying to understand what and how students learn during these seminars.

The project which this talk is based on is of significance both as basic research on the use of fiction and as applied research on an under-researched field: professional education, with a specific focus on medical education. There is a lack of research on learning practices in professional educational. Since the use of fiction in medical education is common, both nationally and internationally, it is of importance to examine the practice, using adequate theoretical frameworks and methods.

Lotta Bergman (Malmö University)

“Reading as passion and social practice”

This presentation deals with research on the reading practice of ordinary readers in a book club. The background is the growing gap between professional reading within the academy, characterized by critical distance and analysis, and ordinary readers reading, often considered as immersive, naïve and uncritical. The lack of research on ordinary readers reading has been noticed by several scholars (Felski, 2008, Miall, 2006; Persson, 2011) but research is still scarce. The purpose of the study was to understand the characteristic features of the reading practice and the meaning making processes that takes place within it. The case study was carried out in a book club with seven women who meet regularly to discuss fiction. The material consists of four documented meetings, interviews with all participants and notes taken in connection to the meetings. The result show a multifaceted reading practice characterised by, on the one hand, immersion and strong emotions and, on the other hand, reflections and critical analysis both on the fiction and the world outside.

The reading practices affects the participants' reflections on their lives and their place in society in a decisive way. The result can provide important insights for the teaching of literature.

Cecilia Björkén-Nyberg (Halmstad University)

“Empathetic Ears: The audiobook, aesthetics and affect”

Judging from sales figures, the popularity of the audiobook is more than a passing trend. While everyone seems to have an opinion on the topic, either one listens avidly or one refuses to abandon the ingrained habit of print, the aesthetic dimension of the listening experience has long been underexplored. Recently, however, producers and researchers have started to show a growing interest in the actual voicing of a text and its aesthetic effect and, consequently, readers are becoming less categorical. Reading with one's ears is neither inferior nor superior to reading with one's eyes; it is quite simply a different experience.

My talk is founded on the assumption that this difference is related to double voicing which can be studied through the theoretical lens of audionarratology. What happens when the metaphorical voice goes physical in the performing act of narration? My focus is on the materiality of voice, what Roland Barthes famously termed its “grain.” A key argument is the recorded voice as a facilitator for an empathetic stance. In my study of the shift to the listening mode with its affective potential, previous research findings on readers' emotional responses to print texts based on such parameters as story type (descriptive, emotional) and set (sympathetic spectator, identification) will be used as a reference point.

Anna Fåhraeus (Halmstad University)

“Professional development and reflections on reading fiction as a means of understanding the experience of empathy”

This paper will report on a two-year (fall 2014-fall 2016) collaborative project conducted by literary specialists and nursing care teachers and researchers at Halmstad University in Sweden. In the project the aim has been to investigate whether using a narrative model of empathy as a basis for talking about fiction can ensure a better meta-cognitive understanding among nursing students of what empathy is and how it works as a dynamic process. The research has shown that the perceived benefit and outcomes of discussions

about novels and memoirs within the nursing program are improved through actively focusing on the variations in the empathetic response to narrative. An analysis of 147 student surveys shows that there are similarities in the emotional and cognitive response that can provide a more systematic and shared vocabulary for the experience of empathy as a process. It is our contention that raising awareness of the shifting characteristics of empathy and its malleability contributes to the ability to make reflective assessments of the role of negative as well as positive empathic responses in patient care. The results also point to the potential for increased self-awareness which could contribute to understanding empathy fatigue.

Olivia Fialho (Utrecht University)

“Empathy in Transformative Reading: An Empirical Model”

Growing scientific evidence indicates that reading literary narrative fiction can play an important role in enhancing readers’ interpersonal competencies and social interaction. It can also foster moral improvement in terms of pro-sociality, altruistic behaviour and empathy. In this sense, studies on reading processes are necessary to illuminate how experiencing literary narratives may result in deeper understandings of who we are (self-perceptual depth) and who we are in relation to other fellow human beings (self-other perceptual depth). Such understandings are essential for our social functioning as they promote empathy and sympathy for others, for example, which might impact altruistic and ethical beliefs, attitudes and behaviors. This study intends to gain access to how readers describe their subjective experiences of reading literary narrative fiction by exploring the moments in which changes in self and self-other perceptions occur. To this purpose, thirty thematic semi-structured in-depth interviews are conducted with native speakers of English, in two sessions. In the first session, participants’ most memorable transformative reading experiences are explored. In the second, one participant-selected story is reread, with a focus on five evocative passages. Results show that empathy comes about in transformative reading as readers (a) vividly imagine story characters, (b) put themselves on the shoes of characters to evaluate story situations, and (c) take on the experience of characters as if it were their own. They also show how these are necessary components for the unfolding of transformative reading within a networks empirical model.

Frank Hakemulder (Utrecht University)

“Deep into the depths: Where do stories become meaningful?”

Indeed, it seems that the more people read literary fiction, the higher they score on measures of social-cognitive abilities (e.g., theory of mind, empathy). However, the overall

effect sizes are small, and underlying causes unknown (see for a meta-analysis Mumper & Gerrig, 2016). Moreover, some experiments reveal a direct effect of reading literary fiction on variables such as empathic abilities (e.g., Kidd & Castano, 2013), but others do not (e.g., Dijkstra et al., 2015). This compels us to shift the focus of our research agenda from questions such as “Does reading literary fiction affect readers’ social competences?”, to questions like “Under what *conditions* is reading literature effective?” and “*How* does literature actually work?” For that purpose this presentation attempts to map the unique qualities of literary reading that might enhance relevant aspects of personal growth. Furthermore, it will be argued that these are not mere academic issues. Our inquiries should preferably be conducted in collaboration with practitioners (e.g., in the context of education, health communication, vocational training, management coaching, shared reading groups).

First, we will concentrate on what it means to be exposed to *literary characters*. It will be argued that feeling empathy for literary characters or trying to figure out their thoughts, emotions, and motivations might be more challenging than for, say, the type of characters we encounter in popular fiction. Hence, this may result in a more effective ‘workout’ for readers’ social competences. Second, it will be argued that our future research agenda should include aspects of *literary style*. These may motivate readers to be intensely engaged with texts, and, more importantly, stimulate them to search for meaning. The presentation will conclude with practical implications of these ideas for various social contexts.

Anne Mangen & Karin Kukkonen (University of Stavanger)

«Empathy and literary reading in the digital age»

Lately, scholars from literary studies, psychologists and neuroscientists have, on several occasions, pointed to the connections between literary reading and aspects of pro-social behavior, most prominently, those of empathy and mentalizing (i.e., Theory-of-Mind). One study (Kidd & Castano, 2013) found that readers who had read award-winning literary texts scored higher on a variety of measures for empathy immediately after reading, than readers who had read best-sellers or non-literary texts. Published in *Science*, the study received substantial media coverage and served to put questions about the effect of literary reading on pro-social behavior firmly on the agenda. However, more recent studies have shown Kidd & Castano’s findings difficult to replicate (Black & Barnes, 2015; Kidd & Castano, 2017; Panero et al., 2016).

In this presentation, we will cast a critical light on aspects of the theoretical framework surrounding research on literary reading and empathy, as well as present some findings from empirical research on the topic. We will then discuss some of the challenges for establishing valid measures of empathy in connection with literary reading and suggest that

contemporary digitization processes (including the digitization of literary texts) amplify these challenges and underline the need to investigate the issue further.

David Peplow (Sheffield Hallam University)

“Building community through conflict? Exploring the role of discord in a reading group”

Book groups are sometimes seen as relatively unconstrained, utopian spaces, where readers can disclose personal information, can 'try on' different identities through developing empathetic relationships with authors and characters, and can collaborate on the production of literary meaning with like-minded readers. In a similar vein, research suggests that reading literature can help us to acknowledge the existence of a variety of different, and often contradictory, ways of interpreting the world. While accepting that these conclusions may be broadly true for many readers and the descriptions accurate for many different book groups, in this paper I consider how useful these descriptions are when we look at groups for which disagreement is common and disharmony is a normal, default state of being. I focus on one book group that formed part of my ethnographic research (Peplow, 2016; Peplow et al., 2016), drawing on interviews conducted with readers and audio recordings from the group's meetings. I demonstrate how this book club's fractious identity is manifest both at the level of group organisation and in the talk between readers. I also consider whether, in spite of the evident disharmony, this book group can be considered a community of practice.

Cecilia Pettersson (Gothenburg University)

«Bibliotherapy and health»

Bibliotherapy, the use of literature in order to improve health, has attracted an ever greater interest in a Swedish context in recent years, both as a method and as a research area. The predominant models of the bibliotherapeutic process refer to psychodynamic theories of how mental recovery occur, or ought to occur. The perspective in this model originates from the persons and institutions that perform and provide bibliotherapy. The British scholar Liz Brewster has criticized this focus in bibliotherapy and instead propagated for what she calls user-centered bibliotherapy. This means that the discussion and theories about the effects of bibliotherapy are extracted through the users' stories about their experiences of reading for improving mental health. In my research on people suffering from mental health disorders and women on sick leave, I have a similar user-centered perspective on bibliotherapy. In my presentation, I will give examples of this bibliotherapeutical approach as well as discuss its strengths and weaknesses.

Allison Skerrett, University of Texas at Austin

“The Potential of Transnational Youths’ Multiliteracies for Literacy Education and Social Justice in a Globalized World.”

This talk draws from Dr. Skerrett’s extensive and ongoing research with transnational youths and their teachers across diverse global geographies including the United States, the Caribbean, Mexico, South Asia, and Asia. Dr. Skerrett will discuss the theoretical principles and instructional practices of transnationally-inclusive forms of literacy education developed in her book, *Teaching Transnational Youth: Literacy and Education in a Changing World*. She will then share new findings from her ongoing research pertaining to the unique forms and features of the multiliteracies practices transnational youths develop from their border-crossings and sojourns across varied national and cultural geographies. Dr. Skerrett will further theorize how these transnationally-generated multiliteracies practices can be prioritized in literacy education to promote the social and academic identities and development of all youths. Potential outcomes of such literacy instruction will be discussed, including youths’ development of critical perspectives on texts and the world, senses of global citizenship, and related commitments and capacities to make the world more just through their multiliteracies practices.

Elisabeth Skog & Cecilia Björkén-Nyberg (Halmstad University)

“Losing Oneself in Words – Finding Ourselves in Sound: The Halmstad Poetry Lab”

Being immersed in narratives is often said to be a means of making readers forget the passing of time. As such they may have a beneficial impact on our wellbeing not least due to our capacity to empathise with fictional characters. Poetry, by contrast, forces us to pause. Lyric poetry in particular tends to focus on states and stasis. Thus, while we naturalise texts by narrativising them, we struggle with the “unnaturalness” of poems that force us to pay attention to friction, to see, hear and voice it. This methodology helps us engage in a continuous process of understanding not only ourselves but the experiences of other people and cultures and, paradoxically, to find new narratives while doing so.

Creative friction is explored in the Poetry Lab (Lyriklabbet), set up jointly by Halmstad city library and Halmstad university in the spring of 2017. Here poetry’s artifice and segmentivity – as opposed to naturalness and flow – is taken as a starting-point for slowing down time and dwelling on emotions and mental states. The main object is to promote a sense of wellbeing through an experimentation with words and the embodiment of voice. Existing poems are studied as well as fresh poems composed by lab members out of material that comes their way in everyday situations. In this presentation, we will be demonstrating how we work in the poetry lab. An important aspect is the use of sound technology as an

instrument for challenging the naturalness of the poetic text. By manipulating, rearranging and recontextualising the text through the recorded voice the multidimensionality of the poetic material is foregrounded. The creation of such a sound archive is quite simply a means of staying sound.

Maria Wennerström & Johan Wickström, Uppsala University

“Ethics, power and empathy through the lens of literary fiction in the practice of educational development”

Being a teacher in Higher Education is truly intertwined with ethical issues. In our presentation, we would like to discuss how literary fiction might be used in teacher training in order to raise questions of power, interpretation and identification. We argue that fiction is valuable in at least four senses: Firstly, it might ease the dealing with ethically and emotionally delicate problems linked to pedagogical situations since “reality” is filtered by a literary text. Secondly, it promotes the ability to change perspectives and identify with others which is crucial for teachers who meet a diverse student group and need to reflect on their own privileges. Thirdly, fiction supports a deeper social understanding (Rosenblatt, 1995) – e.g. concerning who has access to HE and who has not – by including emotional and sensual dimensions that usually are not part of the academic discourse. Thus, fiction enhances experiences of transformative learning and self-reflection that teachers might convey to their students as well. Fourthly, the “complexity and variety revealed to us in literature” (Nussbaum, 1992) reflects the complex character of pedagogical situations that are hardly fully described by theories and models frequently used within educational development – such as deep- and surface strategies of learning, constructive alignment and different epistemological taxonomies. It has therefore the potential to counteract “dogmatic abstract treatises” and “reductive theories” (Nussbaum, 1992) by offering alternative and more open approaches. By giving some examples from literary fiction, we hope to further explore these issues in our presentation.