Theologies of Reading

New Perspectives on Pupil Engagement with Texts
An Introduction

What are we doing when we're reading?
Why do we read?
How should we understand the relationship between reader and text?

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Reading is for so many of us such an ordinary and everyday activity – so basic to how we teach others, and how they learn from us – that it doesn't always occur to us to ask *what it is* we're doing. The assumption might be that whether we're making our way through a novel, or scanning an online news bulletin for the latest updates, or checking the list of ingredients on the back of a crisp packet, reading is all about consuming information. That is – we might presume reading is all about 'getting' content, or amassing data. Certainly, where digital technologies have been employed to make our reading experiences faster, easier, and more accessible, via smart phones, tablets, and laptop screens, this assumption about reading is exacerbated. But when we stop to think about it, and to consider, for instance, the way that our attention shifts, depending on what we're reading – or the way that different sources demand different levels of scrutiny from us, or the way that we can credit some texts with changing the way that we think, or even how we live our lives – then it is clear that the reality is more complicated. We can begin to ask questions about different reading methods or practices, and to begin asking about the relationship in each case between reader and text.

Indeed, all teachers are mindful about equipping their pupils with the critical reading skills to assess the validity and credibility of the sources they're using (this is, after all, the 'post-truth' age, in which social media is flooded with fake news). Those who work with older pupils will also be used to discussing texts in light of their historical context, taking account of an author's background, or considering how a particular source has been evaluated, over time, by a number of different scholars. In these cases, the task of reading involves staying alert and 'on top of' your material. It requires a several-step process of interpretation, and it means considering the text as a historical object, whose meaning and significance it is your task to search for with the help of a series of external and internal hints and clues.

But what about reading *religious texts* in particular? And if we're thinking about reading in the context of a study of religion and worldviews in the classroom, we can also ask: how does the way that we read reflect notions about the truth, meaning, or authority of a text?

Historically, religious traditions have generated some of the most detailed regimes of reading, resulting in reading practices like Qur'anic recitation, Midrash, and Lectio Divina, each with their own commitments to the truth of sacred text, as well as their own mechanisms for expressing reverence for the text's authority. But disciplines like translation, hermeneutics, and practical criticism, which are taught outside of a specifically religious context, also share common terms, methodologies and horizons of meaning with religious practices, even if they might differ in their understanding of what is 'true' or authoritative.

This resource will:

- explore this question of how reading relates to questions of truth and meaning
- equip teachers with an awareness of a range of reading practices
- invite teachers to consider how these different reading practices, or 'theologies of reading' can be applied in the classroom context

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This resource has its foundation in a research seminar of the same name, held in 2017-18 at the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (CRASSH) at the University of Cambridge, and convened by Dr Ruth Jackson Ravenscroft, Dr Simone Kotva, and Dr Laura McKormick Kilbride.

Reading as a living process

Lectio Divina

In this practice (*lectio divina* is Latin for 'divine reading'), reading is established as a dialogical act, a living process; the text is not an inert document, but inhabits the voice of the reader.
Lectio divina is a traditional Christian monastic practice. It carries a sense of the importance of slowness, paying attention, and reading aloud to oneself. It invites the reader to seach for hidden and higher 'spiritual' meaning in the text.
Those practicing it will read, meditate, pray, and contemplate, all as part of the same practice. Yet as a historically monastic practice, this kind of reading is done in community with others.

What does this offer for the classroom?

Providing opportunities to read aloud to oneself, but also being in community. Stressing the importance of not assuming one particular reading to be right, but being open to hidden and sometimes surprising meanings. Allowing the words of the text to speak for themselves. Asking the question 'What does this word say to me? What does this phrase say to me?' Deliberately allowing space and consciously allowing time for listening to the spoken text and seeking meaning in it.

An example

Ask pupils to read a quotation slowly. Consider each word. What does it say to them? What might it be saying to others?

The I am sayings in the Gospel of John work particularly well for this activity.

Further reading

See Ampleforth Abbey's post https://www.ampleforth.org.uk/abbey/news/lectio-divina

Read Dom David Foster's article on the practice
https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/uploads/content/bible_in_transmission/files/2008_spring/BiT_Spring_2008_Foster.pdf

Consider the introduction to the Rule of St Benedict
https://www.solesmes.com/sites/default/files/upload/pdf/rule_of_st_benedict.pdf

Reading as internalisation of the transcendent

Recitation and Memory

Within the muslim community, public recitation of the Qur'an is highly valued. The Qur'an is understood by muslims to be the word of God–a divine message revealed to the prophet Mohammed and then recorded and conveyed by him. Recitation demonstrates the relation between the sound, the rythmn, as well as the pronunciation of the sacred text, and its meaning. It is a highly skilled discipline, governed by a series of detailed rules to ensure correct pronunciation. There is also a strong tradition within Islam of memorizing the whole Qur'an. By reflecting on the practice of recitation, we are invited to consider how reading is metaphysical in nature, and how the spoken word has power in terms of behaviour and attitude.

What does recitation offer for the classroom?

We can encourage pupils to learn small extracts, poems and text for memory. We can promote the listening readings of the Qur'an and other texts. This is far easier now with a range of podcasts available.
Discussing the importance of recitation for many Muslims could form part of a scheme of learning for pupils. For many Muslims, recitation means 'participation in a divine revelation', and this can sometimes be missed.
There is no mention of silent reading of the Qur'an. Its power lies in its oracy.

An example

Asking different pupils to read a piece of text out loud and to listen for different intonation and music within the reading. For example, in groups of three each pupil reads the same short text out loud to one another. They note emphasis and how words and phrases are spoken and then share their interpretations with each other.

Further reading:

For a lecture introducing the subject of Qur'anic recitation, delivered by Kristina Nelson (author of The Art of Reciting the Qur'an) in Edinburgh view this video. The video includes examples of recitation.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fNfPVPCIcsA

In this BBC World Service podcast, Razia Iqbal considers the oral and artistic traditions which surround the Qur'an. You will need to sign in to listen to it.
https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p0092pw0

For more advanced material dealing with Muslim theological and mystical scriptural commentary in the context of the secular university, see Tim Winter's article on 'Qur'anic Reasoning as an Academic Practice
https://www.interfaith.cam.ac.uk/resources/lecturespapersandspeeches/quranicreasoningasacademicpractice

Reading as commentary

Midrash

Midrash refers to a specific genre of authoritative rabbinic literature within Judaism. It involves a searching and rigorous interpretive practice, seeking theological and practical answers by looking at the meaning of words in biblical and canonical texts. Midrash will respond to contemporary problems, and will make connections between the text and lived reality of Jewish faith.

What does this offer in the classroom?

Pupils can undertake silent debates, commenting and asking questions directly on the text. This can work well with both words and images.
We can invite pupils to use biblical and other commentaries. There are many now available online. Pupils can compare different interpretations of the same text, evaluate these interpretations and decide which is more convincing. They might explore some of the challenges of conflicting interpretations.

Double Entry Journal

From the text	From your mind
What is the passage about?	What is your reaction?
List some interesting language	What is your theory or idea about this passage? What does it make you think about?
An important quote	What other stories or events does this passage remind you of?
What is the key moment or event in this passage?	What explanation can you give for why this passage/story is still read or retold today?
What is the main idea, theme or concept?	How important do you think this passage is to believers?
Is there a problem or conflict? If so, what is it?	What do other people in your group think about this passage?

An Example

We can help pupils to create their own commentaries. One way of doing this is to use a double entry journal like the one opposite.

Further Resources

This presentation by Dr Daniel Weiss on Rabbinic interpretation of scripture & divine revelation: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zIdnlOngxqE&feature=youtu.be

You can find the Encyclopaedia Britannica entry on Talmud & Midrash https://www.britannica.com/topic/Talmud#ref34866

BBC Radio 4's In Our Time programme on The Talmud may also be of interest. https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b044j7pd

Reading as bearer of meaning

Prosody

This discipline broadly considers how timing, phrasing, emphasis and intonation are related to the meaning of speech. In conversations about poetry in particular, it is concerned with the patterns of sound and rythym that are used in poems.
Consider how the way a person reads the text can shape the meaning of that text– how using emphasis, or pauses, or softness in a performance can tell us more about a word than its 'literal' meaning on the page, or the grammatical structure it is embedded in.
We often tend to look out for 'special language' in a short piece or a poem, but what about if we took a closer look at the richness of every word? Even the most insignificant word has meaning, and contributes meaning to the whole.

What does this offer in the classroom?

We might look at short pieces of text and closely 'zoom in' to look at each word. Does emphasis on different words change meaning? Have different translations emphasized different words? You might give pupils a text without punctuation and ask them to make sense of it by adding in emphasis and punctuation. How do we give meaning to texts? Is there a true meaning? Are there many truths? Does it matter? There may also be an opportunity to consider the etymology of words as part of this approach.

An example

If we take Luke 17 v 11-19 in the bible, it is a narrative about the 10 lepers. The last verse says:

Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? 18 Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?" 19 Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well." (The Bible, New International Version).

The sense in the last phrase may vary depending on whether you emphasise the word 'your, 'faith', 'you' or 'well'.

Further Reading

A guide to prosody produced by the Poetry classroom at the University of Harvard: https://poetry.harvard.edu/guide-prosody

Entry on Prosody in Encylocpaedia Britannica:
https://www.britannica.com/art/prosody

'Why Prosody and Rhythm Matter–in Poetry and and in the Humanities at Large', a lecture by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, given at the University of Cambridge.

Reading as interpretation

Hermeneutics

'The science of interpretation'. The broad term for describing the discipline of understanding the meaning of texts, in which we ask where we think where this meaning comes from. The reader? The intention of the author? The language the author is using? The historical and social context? (For religious texts) a divine source?

Translation

There are varying perspectives on what should be prioritised in the act of translating a text from one language into another. Is a translation which is literally correct better than a beautiful one, which captures the style and form of a piece? What is meant by an accurate translation? Is a truthful or complete translation ever possible? The most important point for the teacher is that they are aware of the variety of possible translations, and consider introducing some of the first language texts.

Paraphrase

Paraphrase does not simply mean a summary, it is about expressing the essence or heart of a text. The idea is to 'capture' the text. Art could be described as a form of paraphrase.

What do these practices offer for the classroom?

We should consider providing different translations of the same text. This is easy to do using a tool like Bible Gateway. Using first language texts for pupils, even if it is for individual words, is vital. Using translations can help to raise questions of truth and meaning with pupils as they consider whether a translation can hold the 'full truth' of an original text or not. Pupils can create their own paraphrases through poetry, art, music and so on, as well as narrative text.

An example

Pupils could paraphrase a text using emojis or 'text' speak. This means they will have to interpret the text in order to paraphrase it. This provides their own layer of meaning to the text itself.

Further Resources

For a basic introduction to the general topic of hermeneutics, the 'science of interpretation, see the Stanford Encyclopaedia of philosophy entry https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hermeneutics/

Jens Zimmermann gives a very short introduction to hermeneutics https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6wPTV5hyB0Y

Further general reading and resources

Talmud and Midrash: You can read Moshe David Herr's entry on Midrash in the Encyclopaedia Judaica http://midrash.rabbinics.org/01%20EJ%20Midrash.pdf

Jessica Frazier describes the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans Georg Gadamer https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y58NKaQXaA8

The website for the 'Ambient Literature' project run by researchers in Bristol, Bath, and Birmingham is worth a look (https://research.ambientlit.com). The project tasks itself with thinking about the future of reading and of the book. It considers how technologies and social practices might feature in this future. We particularly recommend this blog post on St Augustine and reading, by Ian Gadd. https://research.ambientlit.com/index.php/2018/03/12/tolle-lege/

The Faculty of English at Cambridge has produced a very helpful online Introduction to the discipline of Practical Criticism – a practice we will be considering on our study day together. The introduction can be accessed here. https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/pracrit.htm

Ruth's blog post about the original 'theologies of reading' seminar series, organised through CRASSH, Cambridge, and co-convened with Dr Laura Kilbride and Dr Simone Kotva, can be accessed here. http://www.crassh.cam.ac.uk/blog/post/why-and-how-do-we-read-ruth-jackson-on-theologies-of-reading

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