Literacy UKLA

Reading aloud in Lewisham: an exploration of adult reading-aloud practices

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Abstract

This paper analyses initial findings of a qualitative pilot study of the reading-aloud practices of 17 adults in the London Borough of Lewisham. Although the dominant contemporary image of reading is that of a silent activity and within literacy provision it is frequently assumed that reading aloud is not a 'natural' 'real life' adult practice, anecdote suggests that adults do indeed read aloud, but these practices are overwhelmingly undocumented. This study is the first stage in developing a better understanding of contemporary adult reading-aloud practices. Semi-structured interviews were used to ask adults whether, what, where, how and why they read aloud. Initial findings reveal the ubiquitous nature of reading aloud in adult life, across a range of life domains (spiritual life, family life, work and learning) and for different self-selected purposes (to memorise, to understand, to write and for fellowship). Initial findings reinforce the importance of expanding our definitions and conceptualisations of reading to recognise the diversity and changing nature of real life practices, and suggest implications for our understanding of the role of reading in adult life, for literacy education and for future research.

Key words: home/school, new literacy studies, reading, urban studies, popular culture, adult literacy, family literacy

Background and rationale

If you were asked to draw a woman reading, what would you draw? Many would draw a woman sitting alone, reading silently. The dominant contemporary image of reading in Europe, North America and much of the rest of the world is that of a silent, solitary activity. 'Reading' means silent reading. 'Reading aloud' is the marked form, the exception, that which needs specifying (Duncan, 2008, 2012; Long, 1993; Radway, 1994). Reading historians tell us this was not always so. Once, reading aloud was the unmarked form and silent reading less common, shocking even (see, for example, Manguel, 1996), with silent reading only becoming more common "as the number of readers increased so there was a relative decrease in the number of potential listeners for a text read aloud" (Pugh, 1978, p. 12). Scholars disagree about *when* silent reading became dominant (with Pugh, 1978, suggesting the 19th century, and Taylor, 1996, suggesting as early as the 12th) but agree on a gradual shift from reading being predominantly oral and communal, to silent and individual.

Crucially, however, people did read silently in the ancient and medieval worlds (Cavallo and Chartier, 1999), just as people read aloud today. The shift was in the dominant understanding of what 'reading' signifies; beneath this one label: there were, and are, a multitude of different practices, silent and aloud, individual and communal. This is important because having one dominant cultural image of reading means that those working in literacy research, teaching and policy can fall into the trap of imagining that we have a shared and unproblematic understanding of what we mean by 'reading'. In a past project asking adult literacy learners "what we are doing when we read?" (Duncan, 2009) (and never using the term 'reading aloud' myself), it became clear that while some participants understood 'reading' as silent reading, others' first thoughts were of reading aloud, speaking of the pleasures of being read to and how they wanted to be more confident reading to others themselves. This was at odds with a tacit assumption in the worlds of adult literacy and English for speakers of other languages teaching that reading aloud is not something that adult learners want or need to be able to do. The more I spoke to adults, of all ages and social groups, the more I found that adults do indeed read aloud in their 'real', everyday lives, but these practices are overwhelmingly undocumented.

The importance of documenting, analysing and understanding adults' everyday, habitual or 'real life' literacy practices – to give a 'voice' to these practices and the meanings attached to them – is a core belief underlying this study. Theoretically, this study is based within the New Literacy Studies' interest in literacy as socially situated, and its ethnographic approach to studying literacy as lived (Barton et al., 2000; Brice-Heath, 1983; Gregory and Williams, 2000). It is also based within a tradition of adult literacy teaching and teacher education, which argues that the recognition of the socially situated, multimodal and multilingual nature of literacy is crucial for developing effective adult literacy provision (Hughes and Schwab, 2010; Jacobson et al., 2003; Mace, 1995). We need a better awareness of contemporary reading-aloud practices in order to develop our understanding of the role of literacy in adult life, expand our conceptualisations of reading and therefore

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equip ourselves better to support adults with their literacy development.

What does the literature tell us about reading aloud today?

Reading aloud is a topic dealt with in the research literature on literacy. However, studies predominantly examine the use of reading aloud as a teaching tool within distinct educational contexts. For example, Hoffman et al. (1993) explore the use of reading aloud within school literacy teaching in the United States, arguing for a move away from the 'modal' – a classroom act performed routinely, without thought and with limited effect – and towards a 'model' of effective uses of reading aloud, including using small groups and creating more opportunities for discussion. Gibson (2008) considers a very different context: the international English Language Teaching classroom. She first summarises the arguments against the use of reading aloud, including that reading aloud does not "aid the development of efficient reading strategies" and, interestingly, that "reading aloud is not a skill that many people need; public speakers and broadcasters are in the minority" (p. 30). Gibson then reviews the literature to compile a list of benefits (i.e. as a tool to develop writing) and strategies for the effective use of reading aloud (such as encouraging students to read to each other outside of class time), before concluding that it would be a shame for examples of bad practice to prevent the effective use of reading aloud in language teaching.

However, Gibson (2008), like Hoffman et al. (1993), focuses on reading aloud as an educational *tool* for the development of language or literacy. In contrast, studies examining the teaching of poetry in compulsory schooling explore reading aloud as central to the experience or practice of poetry. Pullinger and Whitley (2013) argue for more emphasis on performance in school poetry teaching and less on the written analysis of poems; Bunpermkoon (2014) finds that the 'authentic' experience of poetry – a meeting of meaning, emotion and expression – is necessarily oral/aural, whereas Trousdale et al. (2010) analyse choral reading of poetry as key to children's explorations of spirituality. Similarly, although the extensive literature on family literacy focuses on the contribution of reading aloud with children to children's language and literacy development, it also argues that the linguistic and wider cognitive gains from reading aloud are interwoven with social and emotional gains, suggesting that reading with children has a parenting as well as a language development role (Bekman and Koçak, 2010; Van Steensel et al., 2011; Vandermaas-Peeler et al., 2012; Wu and Honig, 2010). Reading aloud with children, one of the more documented reading-aloud practices, is therefore at least partly recognised as a social practice as well as an educational tool.

Ethnographic studies of contemporary literacy practices contain examples of adult reading aloud, from Indonesian communities reading the Qur'an aloud during Ramadan (Baker, 1993) to Mace's (2012) observations of English Quaker minute taking and sharing. Seminal analyses of literacy practices within specific communities (e.g. Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Brandt, 2001; Brice-Heath, 1983) include references to reading aloud, such as reading to children, reading aloud in a family circle and reading aloud for religious purposes. These studies provide us with glimpses of adult reading-aloud practices demonstrating the need for a study with a *focus* on reading aloud, where its particular purposes and pleasures can be examined. This exploratory study is a first step in documenting contemporary reading-aloud practices, in order to gain a better understanding of the range and complexity of reading practices and processes, develop future research and inform literacy provision.

Research design

This study involved 16 semi-structured interviews with 17 adults within the London Borough of Lewisham between January and June 2014 (15 one-to-one interviews and one one-to-two interview). I approached voluntary participants through community centres, local libraries and parks, aiming to interview a range of adults in one geographical area to capture current practices within one place and time. I interviewed participants of different ages (24–82 years), socio-economic, ethnic and educational backgrounds, a balanced mix of men and women. Of the 17 interviewees (nine women and eight men), six self-identified as ethnic minority, three grew up speaking languages other than English, four left school with no qualifications, five have degrees and eight hold school leaving or professional qualifications below degree level. Given the small scale of this qualitative study, it was of course not possible to represent the socio-economic, ethnic, faith and educational composition of the borough.

Interviews were between 25 and 40 minutes each, working from question prompts asking adults whether they read aloud or are read to in their present lives and whether they have in the past. Participant responses were followed up with prompts for further detail (What? Where? How? Why?). I chose semi-structured interviews in order to access participants' personal experiences of reading aloud, an approach based both in phenomenological reading research, where reading *is* what readers experience it to be and the researcher's challenge is in accessing the 'lived experiences' of readers (Duncan, 2009, 2012), and the oral history tradition where interviews create public records out of personal testimony, listening to voices which may previously have been excluded (Bornat, 2008, 2012). In this way, the methodology reflects the underlying theoretical framework of literacy as social practice and the

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importance of foregrounding the lived experiences of adults within literacy research and education.

Data analysis started within the interview process as I asked participants for their own analysis of their practices (Why do you do that? What is its purpose?) and continued through the process of repeated listening to the audio-recordings, transcribing and repeated reading of transcripts (Becker, 1986). I analysed the transcripts using an inductive coding and categorisation approach, first identifying 73 different practices. My aim was to create a list of all the different practices mentioned. This involved making judgements about what 'counts' as the same practice and what is distinct. For example, several participants spoke of reading to their small children as part of a bedtime ritual. I considered this to be one practice, even if one person gave the reasons for this in terms of literacy development and another in terms of 'settling'. However, I considered someone reading an email aloud to a colleague to communicate information to be a distinct practice from someone reading an email aloud to himself as part of a drafting process. I then coded these practices in relation to the text types involved (*what*), the explanations given (*why*), *how* the reading was conducted (alone, with others, reading or listening, softly, shouting etc.) and *where* the practices took place. I grouped these codes into categories according to two emerging, and overlapping, patterns: *domains* and *purposes*. Following this method, I aimed to capture a sense of the ubiquity and range of adult reading-aloud practices, as well as to convey the depth of participants' explanations.

Findings and discussion

The texts that participants read aloud range from recipes to legal testimony, scripture to museum signs, poems to speeches, and lists of rules to fairy tales. Reasons given for reading aloud include study, communication, worship, entertaining others, to aid understanding and for enjoyment. Participants described what follows: reading to others and being read to; reading alone, in pairs and in groups; whispering, chanting, shouting and singing; in kitchens, living rooms, bedrooms, schools, libraries, cafes, care-homes, cars, places of worship, courtrooms and workplaces. In the succeeding text, I examine these practices in more detail, considering them first in terms of different domains and then different purposes.

Domains

Spiritual life

Participants who spoke of formal religious practice represented only two faiths: Catholicism and Islam. Despite this, the range of practices within this domain is notable: practices occurring in places of worship, community centres and homes (including care-homes); solitary and communal practices; gatherings where one person reads while others listen and gatherings involving choral reading, chanting or singing; regular acts of worship and also events marking particular occasions, such as funerals. The texts read include Holy Books, hymns, prayers, poems and eulogies.

A woman describes her role as a reader in the Catholic Mass.

> *"I take my turn on the rota once a month […] everyone has the written version in front of them, but I think, certainly it is encouraged that they actually just listen to the words rather than read along. […] I think it is so they are not distracted by the words on the paper, that the feeling is, I think, that it is read. You are given the gift by God to be a reader in Church and to read, and so I think it's how it is put over to people as well. I think that is important, not just the words on the page, [readers] can put more emphasis on it; they can highlight particular phrases or words, hopefully bring it to life really and it's a shared activity, the whole parish community might be listening together, to what we say is the word of God."*

The act of worship is the *listening* to the "word of God" as transmitted, not through the words on the page, but through the gifts of the individual readers as they read aloud. The "putting it over," the choices of "emphasis" and 'highlighting' communicate the reader's own interpretation of meaning and importance. Here, we have a type of reading aloud where to read to an audience is to communicate an interpretation, a particular "bringing to life" of the written text.

A different practice of reading aloud emerges as a young man explains the reading involved in his Islamic practices:

> *"Whenever I read the Quran, I read out loud […] I know how to read Arabic, but I don't know the meaning of that. […] In an overall spiritual sense, you know why you are reading that, but not the words, so when you read aloud you memorize […] every morning before leaving for work I read, I know some passages, and I read and remember it when I am reading, I read aloud to make my memory fresh."*

He describes a reading practice where he is reading to remember and remembering to recite – and both are acts of worship. He is also describing a practice where the blurred boundaries of reading and reciting are intensified in reading aloud a language he does not (as he put it) "speak or understand," a practice he explains is common to many non-Arabic-speaking Muslims.

An older Catholic man describes something similar:

> *"Occasionally, I go to a Mass and there will be Latin and it's more about the ritual rather than the language. It sort of flows over you and takes over and you've got some idea that when this happens something else happens and so on but you don't know word for what what's being said [..]*

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people would recite, I probably could recite big chunks of Latin and not know what it means, but certainly reading and singing are very similar, aren't they? Because with singing you learn things and don't necessarily know what it means […] I think there is a meaning because it sort of flows over you and sweeps you up, doesn't it? […] if you listen to opera, I defy anyone to understand the words but you know what the storyline is and it sweeps you along and you can, you can be involved, can't you, be part of it?"

He speaks of reading aloud as choral reciting, the communal enactment of a spiritual "storyline".

It is notable too that many of those who did not mention formal religious practice nevertheless described acts of reading aloud that could be seen as spiritual, such as an emotional and philosophical engagement with poems and plays. A participant explains why he reads poetry aloud when completely alone:

"I think it's an emotional thing you get from it, it's spiritual as well […] it's like shouting at the wind, you know if you are at the top of a mountain and you shout, it's a feeling of power and it's expressing myself and if I could never read aloud again I'd feel a bit lost […] words are flat on a page, when it's read, it has a profile, it has an intensity […] when you hear them and someone is proclaiming them and it comes alive […] what I see as proclaiming is – there are words on the page and they have a meaning in themselves but when they are delivered and delivered with passion, if you like, they become alive, those words live, you know, 'once more on to the breach, dear friends!' […] and so proclaiming is an art form and it's something that people will, or people can, grow into, it's a spiritual, emotional experience."

This use of the term 'proclaiming' to describe the experience of 'giving voice' to the words of a character in a play raises two points. First, the inter-subjective processes of reading (becoming someone else, if briefly, when reading) warrant closer attention in relation to reading aloud in particular. Saying aloud the words of a fictional character changes or extends the experience of 'being' that character. Second and more importantly for the present study, not only does reading aloud play a significant role in many adults' religious or spiritual lives, but even within this one domain, we can identify at least three clearly distinguishable acts: (a) the interpretive, communicative act of the single 'reader' reading to a congregation; (b) individual or choral reciting as participation in the larger storyline of formal ritual; and (c) acts of personal proclamation, voicing one's own truth or taking on the voice – and truths – of someone else.

Family life

The most often mentioned reading-aloud practice was reading with young children, sharing a book at bedtime. Yet, there were considerable differences in how interviewees spoke of the purpose of this practice. For some, the purpose was to "enjoy a story together" or "enjoying a special time," for others, it was about language development or part of the routine of settling a child for bed and for one father, all of these:

"I would say it's partly to get him settled down in the bedroom instead of wanting to play with his toys in the living room. I suppose for a lot of people it's a special time, for a Dad who's been out at work all day it's a special time for them to be with the kid, you know, it's a way of drawing them to a focal point [and] to educate him I suppose, to build his vocabulary, and um I think children very much like repetition, don't they? They are reassured by it, so that's another thing, to give them a routine."

Others spoke of reading with older children, remembering reading through all of *Harry Potter* or *The Hobbit* over months, "it was a nice time for us […] I liked it a lot; it was lovely to have that at the end of the day." Some spoke of children reading to parents, grandparents and siblings.

However, participants discussed other reading-aloud practices central to family life. One man described reading bits of the TV guide aloud as part of evening family time, choosing what to watch, and talking through options and preferences. A father talked about cooking with his daughter, reading each line of instruction to her as she followed. Another described going to cafes with his family, often forgetting his glasses and needing someone to read the menu to him. A mother told me she reads signs, for example in museums, aloud to her 3-year-old son, not to communicate their messages to him, but to communicate their presence – to share the sense of living in a world of written words. Spouses and partners spoke of reading 'snippets' from newspapers or novels to each other, to inform or simply share something interesting, beautiful, strange or sad. Family life is made up of so many different social and cultural practices, and these interviews suggest that reading aloud plays a role in a significant number of these. This has implications for those struggling with literacy who may feel excluded from some of these practices, and for understanding the complexity of the 'intergenerational transfer' of literacy and other cultural capital.

Work

Several participants started their interviews by telling me that they simply do not read aloud. As the interviews progressed, more and more examples emerged. Reading aloud for work was a common theme. Examples included reading emails to colleagues who do not have access to a computer, or, from an electrician doing Portable Appliance Testing, arriving at a new location and reading to 'gatekeepers' the email that has instructed him to be there in the first place as evidence that he is where he is meant to be. An IT specialist spoke of frequently reading aloud either fragments or whole

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sentences from PowerPoint slides at meetings and listening to others doing the same. A psychologist explained that she reads handouts of "coping mechanisms" and "relaxation scripts" to her clients before encouraging them to read them back to her.

A retired secondary school teacher described reading aloud "to settle" a group, "bring them together" or "move things on," and a retired primary school head teacher remembered reading announcements and lists of names at assemblies. A librarian spoke of reading to groups of children coming in for "story-time", using paired reading strategies to help a library user with his literacy, and listening to a colleague read poetry aloud when the library is quiet. A musician told me he reads aloud to compose and learn song lyrics, and a manager of a clothing shop fills in and then immediately reads "record of meeting" forms to members of staff during disciplinary meetings, so they share the same understanding of what has been recorded. These interviews tell a story of the prevalence of reading aloud in the work place, suggesting a great many different jobs involve *some* reading aloud.

Learning

Interestingly, every participant gave examples of reading aloud when being taught or trying to learn something. This includes the following: reading aloud as part of formal instruction on a language degree; reading case studies to peers in lectures on a psychology degree; reading presentations for peer evaluation on an MBA; and reading aloud when completely alone to memorise information for an electrician's qualification. Examples of reading aloud in compulsory schooling include memories of teachers reading to classes, pupils 'reading around' the classroom and reading aloud as part of home study. Two retired participants spoke of their present volunteer roles reading with children in primary schools.

Yet these interviews contained just as many examples of reading aloud as part of self-organised, home-based learning. One participant read aloud from a textbook to teach himself Spanish, entirely alone. Another reads Agatha Christie novels aloud with his Japanese wife to help her develop her English, and yet another is teaching himself about IT Quality Assurance using YouTube videos containing information sheets, which he reads aloud to himself. This is a useful reminder of how much self-aware and self-initiated learning goes on in adults' lives outside what we might consider formal or even non-formal education, and just how much of it involves some form of reading aloud.

Purposes for reading aloud

To memorise

Participants argued that reading aloud helps them memorise text, whether as part of language learning, religious worship, cooking or formal study: "it helps me remember words and phrases, to memorise"; "it tends to stay in my mind that way." When asked *how* reading aloud helps with memorisation, responses highlighted two related elements: the way it "slows you down" and "focuses you"; and the importance of saying the words, "to feel it in my mouth," "it's quite hard to remember a word unless you say it."

> *"I think if there's something particular you want to indelibalize (sic) in your mind you may read it out loud to yourself a couple of times to make sure that you remember it [...] it's a bit like [...] very often writing something out helps you remember it [...] they both demand focus, they both demand concentration."*

To understand

Similarly, participants spoke of reading conceptually challenging and/or linguistically complex text aloud in order to better understand it:

> *"If it's really dense language it kind of helps to say it out loud...when the voice in your head can't seem to quite- the words are knocking together without making any sense and sometimes you just need to hear it [...] where it's just a bit jarred or jammed, the language."*

The explanations, as with the explanation for memorisation, involve two elements: the slowing down, "it forces me to acknowledge the words, to think each through," and the "saying" and "hearing":

> *"I suppose you are hearing it like someone else saying it [...] it's coming out of your mouth and back into your ear again, isn't it? Makes it clearer?"*

As the parents and church readers suggested, reading aloud involves acts of interpretation, deciding on what something means and expressing this meaning with the voice. When reading to others, people communicate this interpretation, clarifying what is potentially ambiguous in the written text. When reading aloud for and by themselves, people seem to be replicating this communal process, unpicking the meaning as if *for* others, and hearing and understanding it as if *from* others. Importantly, though, two participants also noted that if they were to read aloud an unfamiliar text to someone else, they would be less likely to understand it as they would be concentrating on the "performance".

To write

Reading aloud was at times presented as part of the writing process:

> *"When you are writing something, and as you're reading it [aloud], there is a different word that comes into this place that is better [...] it's like someone else presenting it because you have a double facet kind of thing, double position, you are the writer and at the same time also the listener so you are reading and listening and you are hearing it [...] I change it because it fits better than what I had written previously."*

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This participant describes a solitary process, moving back and forth between the positions of composer and audience, writer and reader, speaker and listener. For others, the process is communal: reading an email aloud to a partner and asking for feedback, or listening to a grandchild read a story she has written and offering suggestions.

For fellowship

These interviews also tell a story of reading aloud as a tool for fellowship, communion or togetherness, whether one-to-one or as a group. Participants' analyses of reading aloud in acts of religious worship are obvious examples ("I think it's about sharing […] it's a shared event"), but there are others: sharing an amusing article with a flatmate, reading a poem to a lover or a teacher reading a novel to an entire class – individuals are united, and groups are created in shared engagement with a text.

Four examples demonstrate the breadth of reading aloud as fellowship. A woman explains,

"it feels as if you are being given a bit of a gift, I think, when somebody reads to you. They are giving you time, they're acknowledging you and giving you something quite special really." Another discusses why it is so important to listen to primary school children reading: "it's to help them along with their reading, but it's not just that, it's the fact they are talked to, listened to." A participant speaks of the emotional impact of choral reading: "everyone saying the same thing […] we are here as a community, not just myself." An older woman says that when she is alone she usually reads the newspaper silently, but if she gets to something of strong emotional impact, she spontaneously starts to read aloud, often without even realising that she is doing it. She describes reading the words of a mother whose son was killed in gang violence: "I'm in that state, I'm relating to that mother, I'm feeling the situation, I'm saying her words, I'm actually getting that feeling."

These four examples highlight quite different aspects of reading aloud as a tool for fellowship, but together, they create an understanding of reading aloud as something that both brings people together and acts as a demonstration of that togetherness. The role and power of the human voice, what the voice adds or offers to these practices, warrants further, deeper exploration, but these data provide some initial clues. These interviews lead us to conceptualise the voice as a 'mode' of multimodal communication (Bearne, 2009), with affordances related to emotion, empathy and the ability to express subtleties of meaning, carrying an interpretation of what would, in written text, be ambiguous. At the same time, they present the human voice as a symbol and embodiment of the *source* of that meaning, the identity of the communicator. The particular power of the human voice in reading aloud may be borne of this very duality: being at once mode and source of meaning.

Implications and next steps

This pilot study establishes a sense of the breadth of adult read-aloud practices and demonstrates the need for a larger study that pays closer attention to each of the domains outlined, to each of the purposes explored and to the many questions raised. It highlights that *adults do indeed read aloud in their 'real lives'*. Reading aloud occurs across a range of life domains (spiritual life, family life, work and learning) and for different self-selected purposes (to memorise, to understand, to write and for fellowship). The data also highlight that the role of reading – silent or aloud – in adult life goes beyond narrow contemporary notions of 'functionality' (as if literacy were something we simply pick up and 'use' for life administration). It is how we enact our adulthood, how we are as parents, friends, lovers, members of communities and faiths, learners, thinkers and writers, how we are solitary and how we are as partners. It is how we are part of groups, large and small.

There are also many different adult reading-aloud practices. Working from only 16 interviews, the sheer range of practices and their associated meanings, materials and competencies (Shove et al., 2012) is significant, from reading personal testimony in a court of law to reading emails aloud as part of a communal writing process, from solitary memorisation to communal chanting. This diversity reminds us that reading practices are multiple, fluid, evolving, multilingual and multimodal. We need to understand these practices better in order to be able to claim that we really understand 'reading' in its breadth and complexity.

Finally, *we need to understand adult reading-aloud practices better in order to work towards richer, more relevant adult literacy provision*. This does not mean an increased and unthinking use of reading aloud as a teaching tool ['modal' of Hoffman et al. (1993)] but rather that literacy education needs to be informed by an expanding and evolving sense of what reading can involve. For example, literacy teachers may wish to pay more attention to developing learners' abilities in reading to communicate an interpretation, or wish to work on reading aloud as part of individual or communal writing processes, or generate discussions about the reading-aloud practices learners have seen performed within their communities and the skills and meanings involved. What is taught and assessed through literacy provision should reflect the breadth of reading practices that adults value. The relationship between "literacy in the real world" and "literacy as taught" is further complicated in contexts where official curriculum documents exist. For example, the (English) Adult Literacy Core Curriculum (Excellence Gateway) breaks "reading" down into a number of elements, including "decode", "follow and understand," "recognise purpose", and "identify main points." However, it makes no reference to reading with expression, reading to communicate, reading to write or remember, or anything else relating to adult reading-aloud practices. This has an impact on

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how reading is assessed in forms of external accreditation, how reading is handled in teacher education and how teachers approach adult reading development in the classroom.

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