

Reading narratives in print - or digitized? Discussion among young adults in focus groups

Introduction

Comparison between the results of PISA 2000 and PISA 2009 shows that Swedish students' performance in reading has declined. The gender gap in reading performance has also widened in Sweden as to boys' decline of reading. On average across OECD countries, the percentage of students who said they read for enjoyment every day dropped by five percentage points, from 69% 2000 to 64% 2009. On the other hand, results of Swedish students' performance in digitized reading show results better in comparison to reading printed text. These changes have prompted questions to politicians, teachers, librarians and researchers in our country.

Survey reports on uses of media in Sweden, the national SOM-survey (Society Opinion Media) and the Nordicom survey, will supplement the results of this selection of age from the PISA report. According to the latest SOM-survey, figures show that 87% of people between 15 – 29 years of age have read books, fiction or non-fiction, at any time during 2011. This is a decline from 2008 with 2 %. Corresponding figures related to this category show that usage of internet has increased 2%, from 98% to 100 % during the same time-period (Höglund 2012). According to the latest Nordicom survey 2011, reading and listening to books as a daily activity among people of 15 – 24 years of age is 36,7 %, out of which 35, 2 % is related to reading printed books, 2,1 % to listening to books and 0 % are reading e-books (Facht 2012). Counted in minutes per day, figures show that an average of 20 minutes a day is spent on reading books, boys 20 minutes and girls 33 minutes. Corresponding figures on average using of internet as a daily activity is 179 minutes a day, boys 202 minutes (3 hours 22 minutes) and girls 152 minutes (2 hours 32 minutes) a day. (Nordicom-Sveriges Internetbarometer 2011. MedieNotiser nr 2: 2012) These supplementing figures strengthen pre-understandings of young adults in Sweden to spend more time on the internet than on reading books.

Reading and literacy is changing with new technologies and reading device. Questions like decline in literacy, in loss of deep-reading capacity, in memory functions, in cognition and knowledge building in hierarchical structures just to mention some, are making reading research an expanding field within various disciplines like pedagogy, didactics, literature, sociology, library and information science, digital humanities, media science, cognitive psychology and neurology. Reading research is often multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary in design, supplemented with transdisciplinary research as for problems that fall into gaps in between like 'embodied reading' (Mangen & Schilhab 2012).

Reading fiction and narratives

Reading literature and narratives in printed books

is up to a crucial point today. Reading literature requires pace, continuity and attention to reach a certain level of absorption. This is, as we have just seen, an activity in decline among young adults, who spend almost 9 times more on digital reading devices a day than on reading literature in print. Reading literature is expanding empathy and reflection in characters (Keene 2007) and to self (Ricoeur 1992, Nussbaum 1990). Reading literature is also a basic cornerstone for democracy (Nussbaum 2010). Finally, reading literature is claimed to be transmitted as to the Theory of Mind, our mind reading capacity (Zunshine 2006). Engagement and targets in research on reading literature *is* for sure multidisciplinary, maybe even sounder than some decades ago.

But what about the young generation of today? Young adults are at a stage in life when construction of identity is built-up psychologically and emotionally, as well as cognitive and societal. What do they think about reading literature themselves? How do they relate to literature? What is it there for and what kind of meaning, if any, do they find in reading literature? Question is also which attitudes young adults have towards reading literature in printed text or as digitized.

More explicitly, this study aims at investigating what attitudes young adults in expressions and statements show towards reading literature and narratives, how reading literature and narratives relate to formats like printed books, e-books, digitized reading on tablets and if there are any explicit characteristics of exchange related to reading literature and narratives in printed books.

The hypothesis is that young adults today do not explicitly show interest in reading literature for personal development and social orientation, either in printed books or digitized as e-books on reading tablet or other screen-based reading device.

Method and materials

Aims and questions are qualitative, indicating empirical methodological design based on interviews. This selected group in age is at a very dynamic stage in development. Therefore focus-group interviews were chosen to study both communication - group-think, group-dynamics, language and expressions – and content. What thoughts, ideas, statements, old beliefs or constructed within the conversation show up? These layers, communication and content, are intertwined in the showings of the results, as is the praxis of focus-group discussion. (Marková et al, 2007, p. 72, Bergström & Boréus, 2005). Theoretically, the philosophy of dialogue has a strong impact on focus-group interviews (Marková et al, 2007). Conversations are dialogues between ways of thinking and cultural traditions (Ibid. p. 25). Speech acts are, according to Bachtin, 'socially shared knowledge':

The work, like the rejoinder in dialogue, is oriented towards the response of the other (others), towards his active responsive understanding, which can assume various forms: educational influence on readers, persuasion on them, critical responses, influence on followers and successors, and so on. It can determine others' responsive positions under the complex conditions of speech communication in a particular cultural sphere. (Bachtin 1986, p. 75f)

The limited number of respondents in focus-groups interviews, i.e. 4 – 6 individuals, simplifies the conversation and 'responsive understanding', heading further towards mutual understanding and consensus. Data was collected from 9 focus groups, out of which 30 respondents (16 – 19 years old) were studying various programmes in upper secondary school, and 15 respondents (19 – 25 years old) studying in Folk High School. Out of 45 respondents 28 were females and 17 males:

School/level	Female	Male	Total
Theor classes Groups 1, 2, 5	11	3	14 respondents
Practical classes groups 6, 7, 8	10	6	16 respondents
Folk High School Groups 3, 4, 9	7	8	15 respondents
Sum: 9 groups	28	17	45 respondents

Theoretical classes were group 1 and 2: Global Future, and group 5: The Aesthetic programme. Practical classes were group 6: Childcare and Care and welfare, group 7: Media and graphic communication, and group 8: Graphic design and Building technology. Classes in Folk High School were group 2: Open programme 2 year, group 3 and 9: Open programme 3 year.

According to ethics in research, participation is voluntary. This implies bias within the results, as the majority of respondents showed a positive interest in questions of reading literature and narratives. The respondents have chosen other names not to be identified.

Results

Statements on reading literature and narratives habitually as a daily behavior vary, not surprisingly, among respondents within the groups as well as between groups and school levels. More interesting is the fact that attitudes towards reading literature are explicitly clear among the majority irrespective to heavy-readers, middle-readers or non-readers.

Attitudes toward reading literature and narratives as shown in expressions and statements

Students in Folk High School believe that narratives affect and arouse emotions because they are long and contain many details. Narratives are related to “good” books. The majority of the males do not like crime-fiction as it is thought to be repetitive. The students read for framing, and making pictures in their minds. Some also describes a good read as to “listen to one’s own voice” (Eva, group 3). These statements are recurrent. Other tells of reading as taking active part in a creative process, especially when reading fiction: “You can easily identify with the main fictional character, because the story is not telling about a real person.”(Ulf, gr 3) Reading narratives has brought reflections on life as well as to self. To Anna (3), reading has given her strength to think about new paths in life. The students give examples of books read in childhood that still gives the same positive, emotional experience when thinking about the future, like *Nils Holgerssons underbara resa*. (Bertil, 4)

Fictional characters might serve as role-models through identification. This led the conversation onto ethical questions, like identifying for the good or for the bad. Young adults with less life-experience or less capacity for separating fictions from facts, easily identify with like “the bad guy”. Annika and Halfdan (9) take for granted that mass murders, beside other things, have lost themselves in fictive violence. Identification has led to suggestion, which is thought to be characteristic from fiction. Narratives based on reality does, according to Lisa (9), not provide suggestion because it tells of what actually has happened. Ronny (9), on the other hand, believes that compassionate emotions from reading fiction can turn in a positive direction: “If you go on drugs, you can change the drugs onto books. That is how strong it is.”

The conversation in the practical classes, notified absorption and concentration in reading literature as important. Karl (8) achieves this through reading books and listening to music at the same time. This calms his nerves and helps him to get close to himself, not disturbed by others. Language is of greatest importance, he says, as you have to reach out for understanding. Karl is a competitor in sports. He is well aware of his personal self, picking and choosing things that are leading to his goals and shaping his identity. Reading literature is one such choice. Reading activates your imagination to create pictures which will be connected to that book for as long as you live, he says.

Students in the theoretical classes are mostly convinced of the importance of reading literature. To Ullis (1) it is a threshold to thoughts and imagination. Others notify it to be physically relaxing, but also that reading is very delicate to stress. Motivation is a sensible thing. There is a great difference if you are under stress and experience some kind of force to read from when reading is voluntary and open-minded.

How is reading literature and narratives related to formats like printed books, e-books, digitized reading on tablets?

The attitudes towards reading literature on the internet are not clearly convinced. The reading experience is not thought to be the same: "It is not your own treat", says Ulf (3). It is obvious that the sensuous experience of a printed book is important and therefore preferable to reading tablets. The tactility, the turning of pages, the smell and the harmony that surrounds the book is not exchangeable, they believe. Clark (4) has tried reading fiction on tablet: "I didn't get the same peace. I read maybe three pages on the tablet of a book I would have read all through if I have had it in my hand. Emotions and printed books format seem to be related together.

Digital reading and e-books were not of any interest to the students in the practical classes. Nobody in group 8 had ever tried to and didn't have any interest in trying either. Computer-reading is too much anyway, which is tiring for both head and eyes, they stated almost in chorus. Feelings and absorption in reading is disturbed by commercials and other things on the internet which never happens when reading a book. On the other hand, reading as such is found to be much easier in social media. "I don't even think about literature when I am on Facebook or Instagram, although it contains a lot poetry and sometimes biography. That is a big difference" (Erik, 7). The conversation on this topic in this group (7) ended in the suggestion for schools to give options in reading books in printed copies and as pdf.files. The differences are, though, thought to be identified beforehand, as the respondents believe it to be much tougher to read on a screen.

Adam, in one of the theoretical classes (2), makes contact with other readers on the internet in anonymous fora. He is astonished of the amount of discussions and recommendations going on, which he enjoys. On the other hand, he believes that paperbound books is the best format for narratives, although he doesn't read it very much. He points out a minor Swedish classic, *Röde orm* (1941; 1945) by Frans. G. Bengtsson (1894-1953) which is his absolute favourite, he says, not least because of its language. Reading literature on the internet, though, doesn't demand his patience as long novel might do. Most often he reads creepy horror, short "sticks" or "pictures", which make him think. The difference is that literature written directly for the internet is much shorter, he says. Others, who have read e-books on the mobile or other reading devices, find it too tiring to read and forget about it. A printed book is different, because it is tactile. You can turn pages onwards and backwards and you can stay concentrated in the reading position much longer. The printed book is appreciated as an artifact, which gives the reading moment a certain atmosphere (Cilla, 2).

Are there any explicit characteristics of exchange related to reading literature and narratives in printed books?

Understanding emotions is thought to be easier from narratives in printed books than in other media or formats. The amount of details improve empathy (Bertil 4, Lina 8). Fiction can also bring life-experiences that the reader have not yet lived through (Clark, 4).

Reading fiction is like escaping to another world and to get new energy from it, according to Mathias (8). It is also giving peace of mind, full concentration and relaxation from others playing mind games (Karl, 8). Fiction promotes imagination, which is almost equaled as factual based knowledge. This according to the students in the Graphic design-class. Imagination is found to be a part of the inner self and your identity: "Your imagination will always be your own belonging. Nobody can take it away from you." (Nathalie, 7) Related to the inner self is also the experience of silence, this according to a low-reading boy: "When reading a book you get your own thoughts and then it turns into a silence, which makes you think of the story in the book and what is happening to you when you are reading. At least that has happened to me when reading, that I suddenly have stopped and started thinking about myself and what I am actually doing." (Rasmus, 6)

Characteristic of exchange in reading fiction is, according to Ullis (1), that your brain is stimulated all the time. Narration is a part of humanity, she says. Narratives are passing on to new generations, it makes you aware of own culture as well as of others. It is a way to preserve human mankind, Ullis believes. To Linus (1), on the contrast, literature brings rationality to the reader: "It is enlightenment, to get perspectives on things. Judgement." The exchange from reading a book can be great, like an investment (Adam, 2). Reading is considered related to time and space within you, and to know you better (Nilla, 2). Awareness of other people is also thought an important benefit in reading literature, people who have a different life, like sick people. A really good book is thought to affect you a long time after afterwards. Good readings make you feel that you are walking within a bubble. You are alone, and you are yet not alone, says Nilla and Cilla (2). Reading literature is thought to make the reader more empathetic. Leslie (5) believes it to be a great advantage, "because I don't have to feel trapped inside myself. Having access to other's imagination is very important and precious", she says.

Analysis and discussion

Reading literature, fictional as well as non-fictional narratives, is an activity which is in decline among young adults. Statistics show, that using internet is more frequent as a daily activity. Questions that arise from is now concerned in research. The interface of technology might be more important to the reading processe than what has been expected (Mangen & Kristiansen 2013). Mangen, Walgermo & Brønneick (2013) show that students who read texts

in print scored significantly better results on the reading comprehension tests than students who read the texts digitally.

The attitudes among young adults toward reading literature and narratives are, according to this study, positive. Narratives arouse emotions affected by written language. This makes readers “listen to their own voice” or “making pictures in their minds”. These statements are recurrent. Reading fiction is found to be a creative process activating identification and imagination. They find themselves taking part in a self-reflecting activity, in position of what Ricoeur calls ‘narrative identity’.

Reading literature is activating introversion, confirming self. Choice is a part of identity and so reading is shaping the identity. It is also found to be expansion of self. Fiction, more than narrative non-fiction, is understood to develop imagination. Narrative imagination (Nussbaum 1997) and mind-reading (Zunshine 2006) is of help in understanding others.

Preferences to reading literature in printed books or to digital formats, shows that reading literature and fiction, without any exception, is related to printed books. It is believed to be a process of moving inwards. Books are sensual as objects, they are tactile, you hold it in your hands, you smell it, you turn the pages. Reading printed books is according to phenomenology a multisensory engagement (Mangen & Schilhab 2012). Results in this study confirm this. Experiences from this are also found to affect the memory, which is not found within digitized reading, except in very short texts. Interest in reading literature in digitized formats is not actually shown in this study. Books as artifacts turned out not to be threatened by e-books or other digital narratives.

Benefits related to reading literature in printed texts are found to support emotions, self-reflexivity, judgement, imagination, shaping of identity and improvement of language. These characteristics are expressed in the conversations among the focus-groups like consensus. At meta-level, reading fiction is an idea, a concept or a metaphor for something positive, something good and helpful to the individual as well as to the society. The final conclusion is that the hypothesis was not corresponding with the result.

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Appendix

Behind this study includes two on-going research projects, financed by the Swedish Research Council, "Reading Fiction in the Internet Society: The Function of Literature in the Personal Development and Social Orientation of Young Adults" (shortened "The RF-project") and 'The Case of the E-book in "Small Language" Culture: Media Technology and the Digital Society' (shortened "The E-books project"). The RF-project is focusing young adults, 16 – 25 years of ages, who are brought up with computers, internet and digital reading for various purposes or usage. The over-riding aim is to find out if and how young people of today are using fiction for various purposes like personal development and social/environmental orientation, but also what they gain from certain selected fictional or narrative texts, and, finally, what their thoughts and beliefs are on reading fiction and narratives for various purposes. This includes formats like paper bound texts and digital formats on technical reading devices, genres, and fiction or non-fiction narratives. This project is empirical, based on questionnaires and interviews. The results will be of relevance in pedagogics, didactics, literature and library and information science and to societal institutions like school and libraries. "The E-books project", on the other hand, is focusing on the impact of the e-books on the national book-market, which is a small language market. The project involves researchers in library and information science and sociologists in media studies at the SOM-institute. This project will combine surveys, questionnaires and interviews with players on the market, like authors, publishers, distributors like booksellers and readers. Question is what, if any, is the social necessity behind the radical change forcing the paradigm shift in from printed books to e-books. Both projects pays attention to readers and reading comparing printed and digitized texts, though The RF project is heading to the subjectivity of inner self and the E-books project to attitudes and preferences.