



Flight or Fright: An Explorative View of the Traits Needed to Sustain Reading Cultures at Individual and Communal Levels Across the African Landscape

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Abstract

If reading is an agent for change and development, the sustainable growth of Africa pivots upon the awakening of a reading custom in the individual where this is sustained through reading communities over time. The research addressed reading in a concurrent manner, where it is accepted as an isolated experience that is meant to survive in a communal form. The research unravelled intrinsic motivation and enjoyment as well as the dispensation of value and creation of meaning behind habit formation and narrative challenges within individual reading experiences. The study also investigated the habitual reading habits of entry level students at a private higher education institution in South Africa and the silent challenges encountered when reading a novel as part of the course curriculum. According to Balling (2016), the individual reading experience is one that is seldom documented. Through the Labovian (1973) method of narrative analysis, a deductive psychological and literacy approach was used to interpret findings. Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory as well as Balling's (2016) developing reading theory, underpinned the identification of challenges and pinpointed opportunities for transformation. This study lends well to Rothbauer's (2006) concept of reading communities which exist in the local, textual, and virtual form. Activities that can contribute to the enablement of such communities within the higher education environment were explored through participant feedback, and recognised challenges were welcomed as gateways for African engineering. Recommendations that could repair and resurrect the reading habits of students include indigenous game-based learning and municipal programme implementations.

Keywords: Reading Habits, South African Higher Education, Narrative Challenges, Social Cognitive Theory, Reading Experiences, Reading Communities, Reading Motivation, Pan-Africanism, Young Adult Reading Challenges.

1 Introduction and Background

The Pan-African literacy landscape is a flourishing terrain of multilingualism, and this is characterised by indigenous knowledge systems. Reflectively, folk tales and oral tradition present as heritage and foundation for literature (Finnegan, 2016) and are

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significantly centred as the source of stories. Despite the eastern and western ideologies of knowledge which also possibly undermines Africa as an actively centripetal force of good influence, it may not be beyond the sector of higher education to question what remains to be the shortfall of sustainable reading cultures once the oral is transferred to the written form. Although this paper will not unpack the transfer of the oral tradition, it is worthy to recall that the literary text is often a product of orality. An experiment by Rickheit, Strohner, Musseler and Nattkemper (1987) found that the oral or written experiences of individuals affected their processing of discourse in the two forms where Prabavathi and Nagasubramani (2018) later mention that oral communication holds humanisation at the centre of its effectiveness. Where such effectiveness is concerned, it can hardly be solidified that the skill of listening or reading is indicative of true human intelligence but rather serve as a means to build and share intelligence. In this way, this paper holds to the importance and value of communication where the relevant language and learning abilities of entry level tertiary students are viewed through habitual and experiential lenses for sustainability of a reading culture.

Adhering to the United Nations (UN) 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development Goals and the African Agenda 2063, the improvement and sustainability of reading cultures nourishes literacy development over time. This will in turn propel a nation toward goals of quality education, gender equality, decent work, economic growth, reduced inequalities, and strong institutions. This paper extends the journey towards Pan-Africanism, along with continued cultural identity building, thus motivating Africa as a competitive international contributor. It is important at this juncture to pause and in a collective manner, establish at the very beginning, that the envisioned UN achievements of 2030 serve as the entrance to authentic solutions that should be carried out and improved over time. Along with such consciousness, this paper serves to embrace what is envisioned as the moment of fledging. It has often been the case where general society views determined aspirations as a beacon of hope through a particular struggle, in a somewhat unrealistic manner. This then risks the increase of resentment amongst a population where large solutions did not instantaneously solve complex challenges. The year 2030 is fast approaching and where this may appear daunting at the present moment, especially as new initiatives and ideas are on the rise, there is an intelligible mindset that should be imbedded in the general society who might have viewed the term 'goal' in a utopian sense. In this paper, goals are anticipated establishments of features, structures, and theoretical possibilities rather than a moment of reaching what is, essentially, a transitory perfectionism. Instead, the UN 2030 goals serve as a point of arriving at a more pronounced occasion of progress- a flight forward.

According to Span and Sanya (2019), the African diaspora extended globally around the twentieth century, and although forced movement remains the wounded beginning of what was centuries of oppressed migration, what this also means is there is room for a global *Afri-resurgo*. Within the sphere of reading cultures and the proposed 2030 point of fledging, the unassuming common sparrow is almost reminiscent of what needs to take place in both urban and rural spaces. Here, reading will be compared to flying, as words give us the wings to soar through a globally competitive and uncertain world. One could ask, if reading is essential for development, what committed activities could sustain the human species within a reading culture? In this paper, what seems to be the

short life span of reading cultures, is re-envisioned through outlining constant features that should exist in recyclable reading communities that could sustain the overall culture. Where features are addressed, these serve as connective forces for the concurrent relationship between the individual and Rothbauer's (2006) three forms of reading communities explored in this study. That is, the local, textual and virtual reading communities.

A literacy crisis is likened to a 'cognitive catastrophe' (Aitchison, 2018) implying that without functional literacy programs and reading cultures, as humanity, there persists a limit on the potential brain power that could improve sustainability of societies. This could lead to disasters with long-term implications. Like the egg before the bird, Olasehinde, Akanmode, Alaiyemola, and Olukayode (2015) reiterates that the reading of books is fundamental to a country's claim of a state of advancement. It remains that stories and entire worlds preserved in books inform us about messages from the past and carry messages that impact the future. However, the discontinuation of a national reading survey by the South African Book Development Council in 2016 gave rise to contemplative thought on the future effects of understanding and advancing literacy in the country. According to the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (2021) based on 12 426 grade four South African learners, 81% of these learners could not demonstrate basic comprehension ability. Additionally, intermittent statistical research compounded problems in grasping the true state of the literacy crisis. To remedy any common context methodology surveying and inform national reading statistics in a more distinctive manner, the National Reading Barometer led by the Nal'ibali Trust in partnership with the National Library of South Africa introduced new and thorough reading statistics in 2023. This has only just allowed a more informed grasp of the literacy crisis which would better enlighten efforts in intervention.

In addition to literature and theory around habit formation, reading theory often appears developmental in varying contexts. In light of reading experiences, this paper is underpinned by Balling's (2016) composition of what constitutes the reading experience. It was anticipated that this could better inform the qualities of reading communities- the proposed vision for meaningful reading encounters that would sustain the culture over time. Since this research is a bi-disciplinary empirical study, Bandura's 1986 Social Cognitive Theory was found to be the most suitable connective means between what is the psychology and literacy of a reader. This paper aims to contribute to an informed maintenance of consistent reading cultures by way of psychological understanding and literacy sustainability which proposes reciprocity and interaction as necessary features of reading communities. It is hoped that the research output will lend well to the implementation and active achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals and development of reading communities, especially within the Commonwealth context where similar challenges may be experienced.

The background exposure of higher education students to resources and reading was empirically investigated to gain an understanding around the apparent lack of interest in Philip Pullman's *Northern Lights* as a prescribed text for a literature-based course at a private tertiary institution in South Africa. It is often within the South African context that the rigid implementations of the Apartheid system continue to inflict sturdy challenges experienced within education operating on a modish stance. This research

sort to go beyond the historical lens and contribute to the redirection of community creation for sustainability where the reading classroom could be viewed as a community. The premise of the research finds at its core, the original notion that education is, primarily, a social experience. The research was based on the following key questions:

- What dissipates the reading habits of tertiary students?
- What challenges impact a continued reading culture?
- What are the dominant features that are needed to sustain reading experiences within reading communities?

The rationale for the study found its intention in seeking to contribute towards specifications necessary for reading community creation. Such specifications should sustain textual engagement and individual achievement in a recyclable manner that extends to the long-term shaping of a reading culture. By insightfully probing the lived experiences of entry level tertiary students, the study also aimed to expose the real experiences and expectations of students involved in a literary course. Through open-ended interview questions, the researchers were able to outline instances of difference in habit formation and the effect this had on the reading outlook of young adults. Thereafter, the researchers documented the challenges of reading a novel for educational purposes and considered how the community-based model could be adapted to influence a worthy shift in sustainable reading cultures. The private higher education context, in respect of compulsory literature-based courses, has for a significant time been one of apparent capacity but declining student desire.

2 Literature Review

Albert Bandura asserts the role of observation in learning, primarily the observation of the consequences of a behaviour being influential in adopting that particular behaviour (Moore, Meyer, and Viljoen, 2017). By implication, observing others is a powerful tool for conveying learning, adopting behaviours (Devi, Khandelwal and Das, 2017) and imitating a model or interacting with a more knowledgeable other, i.e. a parent (Niklas, Wirth, Guffler, Drescher and Ehmig, 2020). Observation is an important component of the learning process (Xu, 2021). The observer is required to pay attention to the observed and find mechanisms of retaining the desired behaviour. Attention to the observed behaviour needs to be continuous, and not a singular event. The intended retention can be achieved through practice and motivation which contributes to reproducing the behaviour and can be sustained by incentives (Xu, 2021). In this sense, reinforcement, especially internal reinforcement, is not a cause of learning but a consequence (Nabavi and Bijandi, 2012). That is, internal reinforcement is found to arise at the end of a learning segment where conditions are favourable. This intrinsic reinforcement, or feelings of accomplishment at obtaining a skill, motivates the observer and the doer in continued pursuit of that skill towards improved attainment. Competing forces vie for this inner satisfaction, where students are now wooed by gratification, and more instantaneous dopamine-inducing stimuli are available (Burhan

and Moradzadeh, 2020). As a result, social media use and constant bombardment of visual information can be viewed as a satisfying competitor to traditional modes of obtaining information (Barton, Adams, Browne, and Arrastia-Chisholm, 2021). In addition, this may also be the reason students are often motivated towards superficial accomplishment with the flock in pursuit of merely passing an assessment. Although an unsustainable reason for completing a form of study, this does reiterate that completion, even in a generic sense, is worth the pursuit of young individuals.

Yildiz and Centinkaya (2017) specify that sustainable attention is primarily responsible for attending to a task for a long enough period to ensure the successful processing of material. Therefore, amongst the hinderances to a continued reading culture, social media usage could be charged as the possible culprit in hampering attention span amongst students. Social media outputs often serve as contributors to nonoptimal cognitive multitasking. This can skyrocket distraction and may become an inhibiting force destructive to the reading potential of students (Kojo, Agyekum, and Arthur, 2018). Viewed as a pervasive use of web-based platforms, excessive social media usage has been estimated as the cause of random task-switching and the subsequent inability to process information at a deeper level (Barton *et. al.*, 2021). Easy access to electronic media, movies and social media content has escalated the presence of the entertainment landscape in daily living. As a result, reading profoundly retreats out of the information murmuration of societies (Ngwoke *et. al.*, 2022), and deep conscious reading is replaced with passive readers who would prefer to scroll timelines on the world wide web rather than pick up a book (Kojo *et.al.*, 2018). Rothbauer (2006) suggests that the decline in adult reading role models propels the preference of multimedia by young adults. Thus, broad spectrum multimedia has the ability to, prematurely, plunge reading to the bottom of the leisure activity list.

Before adopting the role of a higher education student, observational learning and a childhood home environment play an important role in the development of reading habits and attitudes of young adults. When considering the home environment, Niklas *et.al.* (2020) found that children are prone to admire their parents and when the home environment is rich in positive parental reading habits and attitudes, shared reading activities, frequent library visits and access to literacy-rich resources, children are likely to have better reading habits as young adults. Here, the attainment of skill is reinforced externally, and the intrinsic effects sustain development of the skill of reading. When a model's behaviour elicits a favourable outcome that is attractive and appears to be of high value, the observer is more likely to adopt that behaviour (Xu, 2021) and enter into this state of being. According to Quichi and Yuxin (2021), the active role of a parent is a core feature in sustaining reading practices. This lends well to the idea that if an influential figure demonstrates enthusiasm at the prospect of reading and its outcome, the child is likely to want to incorporate this practice into their routine. In addition, the modelling of independent and appealing reading practices into one's adult routine is not exclusive to insisting on a reading routine for a child and should go beyond instruction. Modelling by behaviour and self-practice may be more influential and sustainable as it produces an organic accountability to repeat the skill. When considering the home environment and reading practices, where bedtime reading is a routine, it should ideally continue into adolescence and should attempt to cater for the

cognitive shifts of the adolescent brain. According to Qiuchi and Yuxin (2021), it is preferential for parents to not only buy books for their teenagers but also create opportunities to read together, thus facilitating greater potential to instill lifelong reading habits. A solid foundational literacy home learning environment also extends to the development for online adolescent reading behaviours (Qiuchi and Yuxin, 2021).

Fairclough (2001) in Goatly and Hiradhar (2016), unpack three main categories for understanding and analysing reading and writing. These scholars shed light on meaning creation based on, firstly, what encodes a text in view of writing, and the process of decoding that occurs by a reader. Interpretation based on inference is mentioned as a key connective component when reading and it is also important to note that the social and ideological underpinnings of a text is found to be influential in the creation of greater meaning (Fairclough, 2001 cited in Goatly and Hiradhar, 2016). Reading is, therefore, viewed as a cognitively complex task and one which includes executive functions. Attention, as an executive function, requires both time and effort. Attention is not only a cognitive requirement of observational learning but also of reading and learning, ensuring that knowledge travels successfully from sensory memory to short-term memory and beyond. The organisation of information in the mind, the schemata, are viewed as the operations of the mind that, ultimately, aims to make sense of the world (Sherrington, 2019). Therefore, a possible reading goal can be outlined as the achievement of stored information in long-term memory as this can be continuously retrieved to, as Sherrington (2019) also highlights, understand the external environment. In this way, it is not farfetched to assume that reading is beneficial to an encompassing existence.

In the higher education context, reading habits are not necessarily optional as prescribed works are often deeply embedded with the curriculum. As a way of assimilating a reading habit in the life of young adults, Rothbauer (2006) highlights two approaches to text selection where young adults are concerned. Rothbauer (2006) objectively presents Jones (2002) support of complementing the reading choices of young adults as a way of administering respect before attending to any sort of redirection on reading choice. Prior to this, Rothbauer (2006) also found that Terman and Lima (1931) suggested that the reading of 'worthless' books is inevitable, however, the better judgement of a young adult can be more effective if the number of 'worthy' books outweighs the 'worthless' over time. As a detour from the two intentions of book selection suggested by Jones (2002) and Terman and Lima (1931) in Rothbauer (2006), where a senior figure such as that of a lecturer is responsible for reading-text selection, apart from these pro-life or pro-choice literacy perspectives, enabling interest in a text by association to Fairclough's (2001 cited in Goatly and Hiradhar, 2016) above mentioned categories may suffice as a regulated basis for text selection. The text could be considered for its entry points of reading habit formation by way of the foreseeable ability to decode the writing style, the relevance of meaning to the community at hand, and the placement of the text in applicable social and ideological contexts. In this way, prescribed texts may continue to change with a consistent rationale for optimal achievement of outcomes.

When considering prescribed text selection at a tertiary level, the context of higher education can be viewed, at least in the first year of study, as a context of strangers.

This lends well to Nancy Pearl's 1996 project 'One City, One Book' highlighted by Ross (2006) which involved the activation of reading and thus development of the skill amongst a collection of strangers in a way that also empowers social connections. Pearl's 1996 project was based on three beliefs according to Ross (2006). The first relies on the library, from a holistic perspective, to recommend books or authors that individuals may not have found on their own. The next belief focuses on the deepening of the reading experience by enriched discussion, and the last belief that underpinned the project considered the contribution to common vocabulary as a key component of communicating around the text. Interactions around projects such as Pearl's attend to the fostering of necessary psychological awakenings around habit formation and motivation to read.

Just like Pearl's project, Rothbauer's (2006) construction of three main types of reading communities, when implemented within an educational context specifically, could conceptually elevate profitable social reading experiences of young adults. The first reading community categorised by Rothbauer (2006) is known as a 'local community' and centres humanisation when reading a text with others in a physical environment. A 'textual community' focuses on imaginative and real thought engagement that facilitates a reader's connection with the characters and setting of a text. The last type of community outlined by Rothbauer (2006) is a 'virtual community' which includes technological devices as an instrument for connecting with individuals about a text, on a global scale. The community perspective sees reading as a shared 'event' sparking social connection where reading aligns to the earlier mentioned psychological notion that the independent intrinsic formation is of a mobile cyclic nature and therefore continuous. In this way, ensuring socially connective forces across all three types of Rothbauer's (2006) communities could possibly perpetuate a favourable and dynamic reading culture.

Since intentional mobile mechanisms can impact behaviour and the mind, these can also attempt to cure deficiencies or wounded intrinsic reinforcement which should have otherwise been sustained by humanised modelling. Through recurrent and organic social interaction regardless of generational or agency dependent modelling, prepared fledging of a reading culture that is not without seasonal changes, but one which also steers clear of extinction, could be possible in practice.

3 Theoretical Framework

Balling's (2016) paper highlights aesthetic experience as essential to the action of reading where a text is viewed as a form of art. Although Balling's (2016) notion stems from Gadamer's (1989) philosophical approach to human understanding, Balling (2016) applies this notion to elaborate that the reading process requires, at first, a detachment from the physical reality and later, a reintegration of meaning into the physical reality. This lends well to the entering of a reader into the world of the text by way of language proficiency, through an isolated or communal sitting, and the concluding dispersal of individuals back to the reality of their lives or agency. Balling (2016) then suggests that the challenge or disconnect from the reading experience,

which possibly breaks down the culture of reading in increments, is due to the inability of meaning creation where language and narrative are key areas for observing obstructions. According to Balling (2016) a total reading experience includes a spatial and temporal dimension, and both are necessary for a worthy experience that ensures successful meaning creation. The temporal dimension is concerned with three phases of time. That is, the past that leads up to reading where motivation and expectation are key focus areas, the present which focuses on emotions and moods while reading, and the future which is concerned with life after reading (Balling, 2016). For these reasons, reading is considered a behavioural action. The spatial dimension considers the connection between the reader, text, and context and thus the immersion of a reader into the imaginative and relatable space of a text and their lived experiences (Balling, 2016).

Furthermore, Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory also serves to assist the understanding of the connection an individual has to the text within a reading experience. When reading, the individual is either drawn towards or fearful of the reading experience based on their levels of self-efficacy. Bandura (1986) orients nature of self as active agent in addressing self-regulation which remains an essential flapping force through the flight of reading experiences. According to Bandura (1988 cited in Bandura 1989) self-efficacy relies on an individual's self-perceived capabilities towards a task. Therefore reading, in this case, may be completed at the level in which an individual finds themselves able to complete the task well (Bandura, 1989). Since motivation is a result of self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1989) the social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986, 1989) aligns with Balling's (2016) outline of the temporal dimension as it is also concerned with the psychological constituents around motivation and competence. Additionally, Bandura (1977 cited in Moore, Meyer and Viljoen, 2017) focuses on self-regulated learning towards habit formation where habits are formed through a choice of action that is deemed valuable. To determine the value of an action, an individual observes and gains insight from a present environment that contains a model figure. This environment thus impacts changes in behaviour where intrinsic motions of competence, attitude, self-efficacy, and determination assist the continuation of actions found to be valuable. The social cognitive theory correlates with Balling's (2016) considerations of the state in which a reader arrives at a reading experience due to their past, belief of self, ability to invest in the reading experience, and the value an individual places on the action of reading.

Key factors from both Bandura's social cognitive proliferations and Balling (2016) become apparent in their relevance to understand background modelling deficiencies, current obstructions, and requirements of implementation for the reintegration and sustainability of reading in the context of communities. These combined key areas were found to be suitable for an empirical investigation through a research questionnaire concerned with the formation of reading habits and conversation around the reading experience of Philip Pullman's *Northern Lights*.

4 Research Methodology

As a qualitative study, the research comprised of interview schedules informed by theoretical frameworks on habit formation and the reading experience. A literature review was first completed to determine the present but moving psychological state of young adults operating in a real and virtual society, as well as to amplify the core aspects of reading where theories are developmental in nature. This informed the empirical component of the study and ethical clearance was obtained. The target sample group for the study were South African entry level tertiary students who form part of a bachelor's degree in education programme. The eight participating students had already completed an English Home Language (EHL100) course at the private tertiary institution. Interviews were conducted online and involved a two-part schedule with eleven interleading questions on habit formation and eleven interleading questions on the reading experience. The EHL100 course was literature-based and required students to read a novel in their final unit of course completion. Based on a general observation of poor reading habits, the respective novel, *Northern Lights* by Philip Pullman, served as a focus object for probing, by open-ended questions, the reading experience of young adults. Since the general consensus was a disinterest in reading the prescribed novel, whether in part or completely, it was this particular observed challenge that gave rise to the need for a bi-disciplinary approach since the context of the challenge highlighted 'the individual' and 'the book'. It is also important to note that the study involved the respective text with intention to investigate and improve the reading interest of an award-winning novel that significantly aligned with the course focus on children's literature.

Each researcher devised questions in consultation with each other to ensure assimilation of knowledge and a correlation between the two relevant subject areas i.e., psychology and literacy. According to Huysamen (1998) in Wagner, Kawulich and Garner (2012), structured interviews are favourable where, although questions are presented in the same order across all participants, the researchers or interviewers are able to intervene for clarity. Probing for value of information and clarity of meaning allowed for the generation of useful responses. Consciousness around valuable responses in the interview style was also favoured above a large sample size and after eight completed interviews clear patterns emerged in the narrative. Participants were interviewed once they had begun their second year of study within the Bachelor of Education degree programme and were able to read through the questionnaire upon acceptance to participate. In this way, participants could better reflect on their reading experience holistically in preparation for a meaningful interview. This was also considered as a means of mitigating the limitation of memory when recalling personal reading experiences. The participants were requested from any campus on which the country-wide course was delivered in the contact learning form, and interviews were conducted online.

The researchers concerned were no longer directly teaching the participants which allowed for a more liberal and objective response to questions since the participants would not have concerns around victimisation. The potential participants had to agree to the institutional regulations according to the ethical clearance process and provide

availability for an interview not exceeding one hour. Trustworthiness was strengthened since students were informed that they would remain anonymous. In addition, each participant was assigned an alphabet to ensure consistency and correct logging of information. As a result, participants will be referred to by their respective alphabets and deductive coding was used to extract snippets of transcribed information for narrative analysis. Themes were informed by the patterns of information that emerged in view of the selected theories. This heightened the relevance of the study in its endeavour to expand upon Rothbauer's (2006) reading communities in the context of South African higher education.

Table 1. Sample Group Overview.

Sample Group Indications	Sample Group Details
Qualification programme	Bachelor of Education
Course of study	English Home Language 100
Year of study	First year
Prescribed reading	Novel: Northern Lights by Philip Pullman
	Genre: Fantasy
Institution	STADIO, School of Education
Student status	Course successfully completed

Sample size**Eight****Sample type****Volunteer sample**

Wagner, Kawulich and Garner (2012) summarise Labov's (1973) focus areas of narrative analysis which include the focus on an initial event, and then aspects of the narrative about the event based on syntactic implications. Labov (1997) suggests six elements for segmenting and analysing the intentions and meaning of a communicated narrative. The deductive nature of the research led to a focus on the Labovian categories of *orientation* for insight on growing up and involvements with significant others, *complications* which involved explanations of reading the text towards the climax of completion, *resolutions* which exposed finalities of situations, and *evaluation* statements which highlighted realisations between communicating the event of growing up and reading. Lastly, in view of *coda*, where a connection of the communicated narrative to the present is expected (Johnstone, 2016), the insight of students in recommending community-based practices for improving reading was documented after summarising statements about each type of reading community was provided as a Labovian *abstract*. In this way, the uncalculated, general recommendations which appeared "timeless" (Simpson, 2005) served to extend the notion of *coda* beyond a sentence and viewed thoughts about the future through a segmented lens.

The psychology-based interview questions allowed for a narrative analysis that gave attention to the personal account of the reading exposure of participants from childhood, where this served as the event being probed. Unexpected happenings as an element of the narrative for observing turning points (McCormack, 2000 cited in: Wagner, Kawulich and Garner, 2012) in habit formation, allowed for deviation from the ideal process to be recognised where the ideal was informed by Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory. The lived experiences that deviated from the ideal are objectively referred to as deficiencies for the purpose of seeking to outline key challenges in reading habits that could be treated by the implementation of constant features within future reading experiences from a community-based perspective.

The literacy-based interview questions which followed, considered the reading of *Northern Lights* as the event being analysed and the narrative responses were carefully observed for complications that served to negatively impact the reading experience. According to Labov (1997) the evaluative component of the narrative should expose "human needs and desires". In this study, evaluative responses served to indirectly and highlight the needs of entry level students through a reading experience. Since Rothbauer's (2006) types of communities were envisioned as a response to the reading challenge at hand, the participants were also questioned for insight and opinion on favourable reading activities for better engagement with a text. These could later be considered when designing reading communities. After collaborative discussion and

reviewing all interviews, the researchers attended to developing themes according to the key elements of the narrative analysis within their respective fields of expertise. These were then combined for a cohesive discussion on the findings, and recommendations for preparation of fledging towards a sustainable reading culture were envisioned.

5 Findings

5.1 Early Modelling

Four out of eight participants indicated an element of modelling in their early reading routines. Participants A and F described their mothers as avid readers where participant F referred to her mother as a “*bookworm*”, the latter not being formally educated yet always having a book in hand, and the former using every opportunity to read, even in uncommon places, such as public queuing areas. This influenced the orientation of Participant A who reported ongoing daily reading practice and describes it as an enjoyable, relaxing activity. Participant C’s mother read them bedtime stories and made a weekly habit of purchasing and reading the Sunday newspaper. This is something that continues to appeal to Participant C, and this was observed through the evaluative statement “... *watch her buy it and read it like religiously, every Sunday*”. Participant H was influenced by significant others, and this was observed when the participant mentioned “*my mother and aunts used to read a lot ... always having a book in hand...*”.

It is noteworthy to mention the influence of accomplishment in reinforcing the reading routine. This was observed when Participant F indicated that enjoyment in a reading routine intrinsically incentivized the maintenance of reading as a leisure or time-worthy activity. Participant F particularly referred to a library experience as “*familiar*” and “*exciting*” after checking books in an out of the library and being able to choose texts independently as a child. This provided a sense of autonomy and accomplishment, which fueled a sustainable reading practice as a child and associations with reading as an enjoyable task. Participant F later expressed a similar excitement in reading *Northern Lights* even without a consistent reading routine as a young adult.

Participant E and G had adult figures that insisted they read as an academic requirement, and although participant E and D’s parents took them to the library and provided access to literary resources, they did not actively model enthusiasm nor were they frequently seen reading independently. Neither of these participants have continued to sustain the practice of reading as a means of leisure and appear to use it for purposes of meeting academic demands. Participant E stated “...*my parents never encouraged me to read, nor did I have a reading routine as a child, however they did purchase books for me ...*”. Participant G’s parents went to great lengths to ensure that they joined a reading club at school and read for the purposes of schooling demands. This was often at the expense of playtime which implied that reading was not a leisure activity. Interestingly, Participant G also describes reading as a daunting task and highlighted “*I had no time to play, after homework my parents insisted that I read. I had no time to play. I always noticed that after I read, I feel very drained.*”

5.2 Demands on Attention

Three participants alluded to the cognitive demands of reading. These participants mentioned that they no longer had the attention span required to complete a book. Participant G specifically stated that their attention span decreased with age. Participant E stated that the book must be attention grabbing to pursue reading it and reading is too time-consuming. Participant E also mentioned that other alternatives to entertainment and information exist, naming Tik Tok and Netflix and after stating *'I'm going to be very honest with you ...'* Participant E mentioned that reading *'... means me using more brain power ... I like to put the text into something that talks and then I can just hear it'*. The demand of the written format appeared unappealing to Participant E, and it was noticed other activities with a visual element were preferred.

To further support this notion, Participants G and H spent their free time watching movies and browsing social media sites, particularly sites that offer greater visual stimulation. Such forms of media are considered to be less cognitively taxing and provides quicker access to information. Both these participants categorize reading as a daunting task, especially with the mental exertion required to comprehend content and context. Where Participants' H and D stated that they noticed a shift in habits and drifted from maintaining a reading routine during high school years due to scholastic demands, both still prefer accessing material with images, as opposed to only words on a page, and no longer viewed reading as a priority task. Although Participant H does have an online business and spends a significant amount of time engaging with others on Facebook, they prefer reading the newspaper. The two primary reasons mentioned for this choice include the visual component provided by newspapers. This was observed when Participant H stated *"I feel bad to say this, but the pictures attract me to read the newspaper"* and reading the newspaper was an activity modelled by the participant's mother during childhood, as mentioned earlier.

Participant F highlighted the fact that reading requires not only attention but a specific frame of mind, where one needs to be in the mood to read, and where particular literary content has the capacity to affect one's mood. The participant aptly stated *"I think it becomes a demanding task when you don't have the time because I feel like reading requires a lot of focus, requires a specific frame of mind"* followed by the evaluative assertion *"... I have to be in the mood."*

Only one of the eight participants no longer utilises social media. Participant A opted to deactivate social media accounts attributing it to causing unhealthy patterns of behaviour and wasting time. This action of complication resulted in time being made available for reading, which the participant described as a more relaxing activity. Participant A also went on to describe reading positively when stating through a few evaluative clauses that *"... reading relaxes my mind and helps me to sleep better, it also feels more productive, rather than just sitting scrolling on my phone."* This indicates that the participant doesn't favour dividing her attention superficially and is less tempted by other attention-demanding activities.

5.3 Reading Through the Language

Where the reading experience of *Northern Lights* is considered to be an event, during this process, four out of eight students found the creative words composed by Pullman, although etymologically informed, to be challenging to understand. Participant E significantly noted that the unfamiliar words of the text detract from content reading since the challenge in pronunciation of such words disables the individual sense of proficiency in a monolingual text. Participant E also, significantly, added that “... *the wording required lots of focus to make sense of a sentence.*” This also extends to the demands placed on the attention of a reader while highlighting a psychological hinderance to obtaining meaning of a text. Participant G found that he had to search words while reading and Participant B also mentioned that there were creative words that he could not understand. It was also interesting to note that through the evaluative clause “*I wouldn’t say it was the text per say but rather me not giving it enough time to understand the meaning*”, Participant B mentioned that when listening to audio versions of the text, in some instances, explanations of creative elements were provided. This appeared to override psychological demands and save time in developing the imagination of the reader. This also presents as a compromise that the participant was willing to enter into, and one which deviates from original interpretation that could have otherwise been formed.

5.4 Narrative Progress

It was observed that some participants found the plot difficult to follow in *Northern Lights*. Through the evaluative clause “*reading blind*” it became evident that Participant D could not understand what was going on in the different worlds of the text. This participant mentioned complications in the worlds of the text when stating, “... *seemed like a modern world but there were fantasy aspects which confused reading and made it difficult to imagine the world of the text.*” Participant A mentioned “... *it’s not something that I’m used to reading ...*” and further explained that difficulty in following the plot may be due to differentiation from the types of texts usually read. Where the three main settings of the novel are key to major narrative shifts in the plot, Participant H found that because the settings were unfamiliar, making sense of the storyline was challenging. Participant E highlighted that if a break between reading was taken, the reading experience would have to start at the beginning of the novel again in order to sensibly reposition the understanding of the storyline. As a result, this restarting process also contributed to Participant E’s incomplete reading of the text within time constraints of the curriculum. Participant E also shared that the plot became “*boring*” when interest wasn’t sparked at the beginning of the reading experience.

Participant F, who was one of two participants that completed reading the novel, found interest in the protagonist, Lyra, and this propelled the reading experience in this case. Participant F also stated, “*I found myself reading to understand the character, not just reading the story*”, and through this evaluative statement it is evident that the participant pursued deeper meaning. Contrary to this, the reading experience of Participant C was deterred when the narrative was found to relate to the greater societal

issue of human trafficking. The participant mentioned, *“The novel is shedding a light on child cruelty but for me, it is something I would have avoided ... sometimes there are things that you don’t really want to face even though you know it’s happening in society ... I wouldn’t gravitate towards that, generally.”* In this particular instance, the narrative did not appear to generate interest in the participant which appeared to negatively impact the aesthetic experience of the reader and the pursuit of deeper meaning.

Despite the challenges, students also mentioned that based on previous reading experiences, completion of a text is a fulfilling experience. Upon feedback around previously accomplished reading experiences, Participant C described a feeling of empowerment and happiness stating *“ ... you feel a sense of being alive”*, and Participant D claimed upliftment. In addition, Participant E alluded to a sense of pride which is felt upon text completion and as a conclusionary statement, Participant B mentioned, *“ hours that would be dedicated to reading would contribute to the feeling of accomplishment and now it is about trying to extract something out of reading that I can add to my life ... would make it an accomplishment”*. In this way, Participant B attributed the completion of a narrative to producing a favourable impact on real life.

5.5 Context

Regarding the greater higher education context of reading for academic purposes, Participant A shared a complication of the reading consciousness when mentioning, *“ ... knowing it wasn’t reading for pleasure also takes away the ‘fun’ from it”*. Alternatively, Participant F seemed to highlight reading for academic purposes as the motivation to attend to the text and appeared to maintain a consciousness of *“reading with a purpose”* in this way. Additionally, Participant B highlighted a further complication when stating, *“ ... because it was based on an assignment it was a point of reading to just understand what is required for the assignment rather than reading it to get the whole story.”* Here it is evident that the context of reading negatively affected the pursuit of true meaning. The clauses of complications expressed by Participant E included explanations such as *“ ... I said to myself in the June-July holidays I am going to read this amount of pages this day and then this ... while reading I couldn’t keep that attention”* as well as *“ ... I’ll read later and then I never got back to it in that day.”* As a result, Participant E found that it was not possible to adhere to a reading schedule during the semester break and this contributed to constraints in view of meaning creation.

5.6 Unrealised Communal Experiences

In view of Rothbauer’s (2006) reading communities, the participants unrealised experiences in such contexts were explored. Four participants mentioned their preference for in-person interaction around a text which lends well to Rothbauer’s (2006) local community. Participant C explained an occasion of orientation around other family members to discuss traditional expectations of women. In this way, the text was placed in the world around the reader. Through the evaluative clause *“ ... love*

the in-person social interaction around a text,” Participant F also explained the preference for speaking as opposed to typing points of view. Additionally, Participant D mentioned that if lecture-based discussions around the text were not in person “*we wouldn’t have paid much attention to it, it would have went unnoticed.*” Participant D also explained that the isolated complication of “*trying to figure out what to do with a book*” is overcome in a communal setting and Participant H appeared to reinforce this through the evaluative notion that different people have different strengths, and this also aids socialization. Thus, implying that strength diversity is present in social contexts for improved reading experiences.

When analysing communication about the text in view of the isolated reading experience which informs Rothbauer’s (2006) textual community, three participants recalled significant imaginative engagements while reading *Northern Lights*. Participant E explained that since the Oblation Board of the storyline was understood to be a sort of governing system in the society of the text, such elements allowed for a relationship to be formed because of the relation to the morality of real society. Participant D expressed that because the Queen of England had just passed away at the time of reading the text, and due to the widespread coverage on the news, the novel became more significant and the metaphors around The Church and God provided opportunities for deep thinking. In an evaluative clause, Participant D also referred to Pullman’s notion of daemons as “*fascinating*”. This sort of evaluation appeared to prompt engagement in the reading experience. The earlier emergence of a need for visual elements in a text could also positively impact a textual community where participants expressed this as desirable support in imaginative thinking. While the novel is prized for its fantastical writing, this desire by participants only highlights the need to further provoke imagination in the context of community amongst South African higher education students.

In view of virtual engagements around a text, Participant C mentioned, “*... as long as I have a device, Internet, and time, I am able to read*”, and appeared to favour reading when it is convenient. Although Participant H expressed a complication in context since they mostly use the virtual space for social media, Participant D highlighted that while on social media applications such as Instagram, they often read poetry but couldn’t remain focused when attempting to read longer texts such as digital books. Participant D explained that Learning Management System (LMS) discussion activities around *Northern Lights* were only completed out of obligation. Participant E also reasoned the complication of participation in LMS discussions to the evaluative preference of “*quick and easy*” interactions. Additionally, Participant F highlighted their interaction on YouTube threads when watching discussion videos around the text. In view of external online discussion threads unrelated to *Northern Lights*, Participant E expressed an evaluative “*love*” for Reddit stories and the preference for swiping or zooming rather than turning a page. It appears that the general popularity of applications and the contexts they exist within influence the natural willingness of participants to engage, virtually.

5.7 Coda as Canopy

To recall the analogy of the unassuming sparrow and the moment of fledging into a sustainable reading culture, in this study the Labovian element of *coda* is extended as a distinct lens of heights beyond the present moment. This is likened to a canopy layer of a forest as in a similar way, it is the dense structured space found just below the emergent layer (Nunez, 2019) considered to be the impending future which is understood as the point of implementation of informed reading communities. Since participants were probed for reading activity preference, the canopy of activities is informed by the living beings who make up the majority of the higher education context. The *coda* is also viewed in an exemplary way for its ability to remain both conclusionary, adaptable, and living.

From the interview responses, it became apparent that the ecosystem of preferred activities by participants centered around collaboration with others. Participant E favoured controversial spaces with individuals in real time and mentioned that it's *'... nice to see someone elses point of view before I make my own decision'*. This participant also expressed their *'love'* for debates around a text. Participant H mentioned that a long-term partner system for discussion preparation would assist the acquisition of deeper meaning before entering a lecture. Other activities preferred by participants involved a more solitary approach and included word searches, reading out loud, as well as acting out stories or transforming storylines into scripts. Participant B favoured in-venue role play where the relationship between key characters from the text could be explored. Through this suggestion it became evident that participants want to engage all senses through the reading and learning experience, thus making learning a reality.

Participant F shared an instance where a game was used to scaffold learning in a primary level learning environment and wondered if incentivizing reading and activity completion at a tertiary level would promote progress. Participant F specifically mentioned *'... hopscotch and hula hoop milestones ...'* that could be incorporated as a fun way of progressing through the reading and learning experiences of the course. Participant D reinforced this perspective when sharing information about a treasure hunt game facilitated via an Instagram page. The participant further explained that games bring stories to life and can represent metaphors in a new way. As a concluding statement, Participant D suggested that *'initiating something like this virtually would be interesting'*, thus projecting future success in the online learning space.

6 Discussion

To bridge the gap between psychology and literacy, this study looked towards connective features amongst modelling and attention as well as three types of reading communities. Reiterating that according to Bandura (1986), observation and imitation are powerful tools that transmit behaviours and learning (Devi, Khandelwal and Das, 2017; Niklas, Wirth, Guffler, Drescher and Ehmig, 2020). Looking back, it was observed that out of all the participants, those who were exposed to consistent and authentic modelling in the home environment mostly maintained some form of reading

habits into adulthood. Moreover, it appears that feelings of accomplishment associated with reading, needs to be established at a young age as this also promotes the value and investment individuals dispense during reading experiences. Aside from incorporating reading into a living routine, it should also be perceived as an enjoyable and memorable experience, not seen as a means to an end- a chore. It was also noticed that students did not adopt reading routines during high school years either and this lack of reading permeated into adulthood. This can be attributed to rigid parental involvement or lack of personal reading practice from surrounding models i.e., influential or parental figures. That is, parental figures emphasising reading for academic purposes only, remains insufficient motivation to begin. If the practice of reading is not modelled and combined with enjoyment, a routine cannot be sustained. From the study it emerged that, irrespective of age and context, reading should be incorporated in a more leisurely sense, and it should be a useful prompt for family discussions. This aligns with Balling's (2016) empirical findings that reading should be both enjoyable and provide knowledge and experiences that are embraced for their sense and actualization of newness. This lends well to restricting the stereotype amongst previously disadvantaged persons that reading is only required for intellectual pursuit and hence only truly attainable by intellectuals. A perception such as this should be corrected in order to promote reading as a catalyst for growth in underdeveloped countries where the home could become a space for social foregrounding through reading, as opposed to a historically afflicted place burdened by the pursuit of financial attainment.

Furthermore, students stated that they had noticed a decline in attention span especially with word-rich text, indicating a preference for instant information and visual material. From this it is evident that the availability and rapid increase in the use and customisation of multimedia has shifted reading preferences. Since social media applications devoid of word-rich material appears to exert less cognitive energy and requires less attention span from users, young individuals appear to unintentionally spend time engaging with content that places little demand on attention. This, however, should not be solely viewed as a problem without a solution. It rather implies that further exploration in this area is required to outline ways in which texts can be used for optimal learning achievements in the context of higher education.

When reading a text for academic purposes within the South African higher education context at least, it is evident that students require vocabulary support. Since the study of English language words through primary and secondary levels of education in South Africa does not officially, through the prescribed public-school curriculum, include awareness of word formation based on etymology, once students arrived at the tertiary level, they required an etymological consciousness to properly investigate the meaning of words. This was especially evident in the challenges experienced around creative word compositions in *Northern Lights*. However, where Balling (2016) concurs with Johansen's (2007 cited in Balling, 2016) notion that language should impart change in the senses of a reader, it appeared that when the linguistic ability of students was challenged, the sensory need of students as readers was still sought. This is later highlighted in the discussion around reading community expectations.

Students also emphasised that time spent on reading the prescribed text was either not considered a priority or expressed as too consuming, possibly due to language and

narrative related challenges within individual reading experiences. The sense of boredom experienced when re-reading was also observed as an obstruction to obtaining deeper meaning which appears in direct conflict with the notion that re-reading, in fact, better informs long term memory and cognitive reserve. Goatly and Hiradhar (2016) find decoding and analysing literature through a layered procedure to be an appropriate teaching and learning process to follow in the literature classroom, however, it seemed that narrative challenges within the reading experience hindered the arrival at a form of widespread relational presence. According to Balling (2016), it is the aesthetic experience of reading which remains the essence for arrival at relational presence and this is dependent on cultural, psychological and historical contexts. By this study it became evident that the psychological contexts of the majority of the sample group was already negatively affected by little to no reading habit formation. One student also found that the issues of society dealt with by the novel were something they did not want to confront and therefore read about, while another student found value in the exposure of morality that they could draw back to the society they live in. In view of this, cultural contexts appeared to present both advantageous and disadvantageous conditions for reading through the narrative.

Overall, activities for an all-encompassing reading experience as suggested by students could be distributed and developed within the three types of reading communities suggested by Rothbauer (2006) in order to promote valuable reading. It is especially plausible to note that the collaborative nature of the activities participants suggested could also iteratively restore deviations from reading habits due to any previous lack of modelling by significant others when growing up. Where the local community by Rothbauer (2006) is concerned, activities involving controversial debates, reading partners and role play were recommended by students and observed for the ability to possibly engage human senses.

The textual community (Rothbauer, 2006) appeared to be one that could mainly and externally be supported by the overall teaching and learning process in the context of higher education. An individual student, within a textual community, is expected to engage in the world and characters of the text in a personal manner (Rothbauer, 2006). By this it is understood that students need to find a sort of 'belonging' as an individual reader in a particular community, or rather the community of the text made up by characters and other narrative elements. Therefore, the personal reading experience of a student is central to the development of agency and autonomy within a textual community. Since it was observed that students required both imaginative and language support before addressing the greater contexts of the novel, it may be that the 'local' and 'virtual' conditions can ensure the return to the reading experience is both informed and fruitful. This places the textual community at the centre of the three types of communities suggested by Rothbauer (2006). Supporting the textual community in this way may also improve the necessary investment and realization of value and accomplishment from engaging with a text.

The virtual community described by Rothbauer (2006) is considered as one which involves an online individual and their textual experiences. It is unlikely that a student could successfully and confidently participate in a virtual manner around a text unless authentically motivated and emerging from a textual community wherein the reading

experience was not considered challenging and better supported according to the needs of the individual and the collective. This connection also extends from Balling's (2016) focus on the spatial dimension of the reading experience and the agency of the reader seeking meaning within a given text and context. The virtual community was envisioned by students as a healthy space for re-energising the reading experience and bringing stories to life. Reward systems and game-based learning also appeared to be held in high regard by participants as ways in which the reading experience can become consistent and triumph over recognized challenges. According to Balling (2016), the past, present, and thereafter of a reading experience affects the ability of a reader to dig into a text for depth of meaning. It is, thus, not impossible to begin to contemplate how interactions in these types of reading communities could lend well to the temporal experience of reading, if the physics of inertia is anything to be considered.

7 Conclusion

The study formed a pragmatic basis for exposing and observing the current context of reading practices amongst entry level tertiary students reading a monolingual text within the higher education context of a country that hosts multiple official languages. At the core of the data collection process was the macro-reflection on behaviours around reading experiences while growing up and a micro-reflection of the reading experience through a particular text. Micro-reflections are often not documented or shared according to Balling (2016) and this study aimed to contribute to the exposure of deeper and circumstantial realities. Through this study it is also evident that both established psychological and developing reading theories are applicable in today's society. These theories assisted in determining areas for interventions that can counter prolonged challenges that may be passively increasing or overlooked. The two main challenges in existence include the poor or non-existent reading habit formation of South African tertiary students and the need to engineer a more encompassing approach to the reading experience within higher education which is somewhat juxtaposed against the rapid external developments of social and multimedia. To reiterate, intervention is necessary to saturate the environments of students that serve as the force of power which brings about a responsive interaction and sets the reading experience to flight.

8 Recommendations

In light of this study, several channels for developing the communal approach to the reading experience, where the classroom requiring the reading of a prescribed text can be viewed as a community, are recommended. It is also appreciated that since these recommendations are geared towards a sustainable reading culture, historical reading challenges should be reduced as formation of new reading experiences improves. The following recommendations each require significant and further structure as well as empirical assessment for continuous sustainability:

- According to the Nal’iBali Trust’s National Reading Survey (Polzer-Ngwato, Shilakoe, Morse and Huston, 2023), also supported by the National Library of South Africa, 32% of South African adults maintain a reading habit where books are concerned. This data was based on 4251 adults above the age of sixteen. Municipal reading programmes that encourage adult reading habits, where this could result in parental modelling of reading routines within the home, are recommended to counter the non-habitual state of the greater society. Nancy Pearl, also known as America’s Librarian, has completed extensive work in the area of community-based reading programmes. According to Rothbauer (2006), Pearl specifically aimed at engaging strangers in a common way, based on a central text. This study provides evidence that interaction between strangers is valuable in the reading process. Pearl’s overview was based on a guide, *One Book One Community: Planning Your Community-Wide Read*, created by the American Library Association and highlighted capacity, book selection, and partnerships as a basis for beginning. Pearl also elaborated on areas of budget, publicity, and literary itinerary and further exploration of her work may guide reading interventions more closely.
- Elementary level psycho-education workshops should be introduced to parents. Such workshops can be flexible in nature and can exist through online and school-based programmes to inform and encourage parents and caregivers around reading habits. The modelling endeavour should focus on making reading routines more inclusive where daily schedules are concerned. According to Abramson (2021), habit stacking is suitable for introducing non-existent habits to existing lifestyles. Therefore, it is recommended that convenient habit building form part of the core elements in personalized psycho-education workshops geared towards the *Afri-resurgo* of the reading home environment.
- Where Balling (2016) highlights that the reading experience of a reader is rarely a process shared with specific details, it is recommended that Rothbauer’s (2006) three types of reading communities include a destigmatised element of articulating a reflection on the challenges and the agility of reading through a particular text. The documentation of such data over long periods of time is recommended to provide deeper insight for sustaining a reading culture that makes informed interventions through communal structures as a controlled space, ironically influencing freedom and innovative interaction.
- As an external interjection beyond the higher education environment and since social media influencers are popular in promoting a message (Lim, Radzol, Cheah and Wong, 2017), in a virtual reading community, social media influencers could also possibly champion the adoption of reading habits.
- In light of student suggestions, game-based learning is recommended for inclusion in the teaching and learning process as well as the communal reading experience process. Ng’ambi (2023) specifically highlights game-based learning for its ability to shift behaviour. Since gaming is often observed for its self-regulating ability through features of levels and phases, this also

resurrects Bandura's (1986) concept of an individual as an 'active' agent in habit formation. The Open Educational Resources of Indigenous Games in Africa is a project, led by Professor Ng'ambi of the University of Cape Town, that encourages individuals to freely share the operations and knowledge of indigenous games via the project's website. These shared culturally specific games are then analysed for pedagogical value and transformed for learning purposes. Such projects are highly recommended to foster cultural connections between students and texts where Balling (2016) and this study also highlights the cultural context of reading as a key factor in propelling a successful reading experience.

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