



Developing an engaged relational pedagogy of shared reading

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Abstract

Shared Reading (SR) is a communal well-being intervention in which a literary text is read aloud and discussed in a group. A form of emotion-centred close reading, SR emerged as a reaction against elitist academic norms and was developed in an attempt to emotionalise and democratise literary study by moving it outside of the confines of the university. This theoretical essay argues that humanities and social science lecturers might benefit from introducing SR praxis into their classes. Each section analyses an aspect of SR through emotionally engaged (hooks, Palmer), relational (Hickey, Riddle, Gravett), and critical (Freire) pedagogical and theoretical lenses, arguing that SR serves many of the aspirations of these pedagogies. I then consider how SR might be implemented in an academic setting and the kind of adaptations that might be necessary. This essay is a thought experiment which I hope will lay the groundwork for a more sustained and applied experiment in SR. Throughout, I argue that infusing SR into university settings has the potential to positively benefit student well-being and academic performance.

Keywords

critical pedagogy, higher education, humanities, instructional methods, relational pedagogy, engaged pedagogy, well-being, seminar design

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Introduction

This theoretical essay argues that humanities and social science lecturers might benefit from introducing *The Reader's* praxis of Shared Reading (SR) into their classes because it helps students develop both critical thinking and emotional wellbeing. The praxis of SR developed by *The Reader* is a communal well-being intervention in which a literary text is read aloud and discussed as a group in an emotion-centred close reading. Although not designed for educational contexts, SR can offer academics a tool for meeting the aspirations of emotionally engaged, relational, and critical pedagogies in the classroom. In this article, I begin by describing the praxis of SR, focusing on its emphasis on emotional connection and radical contextualisation. I then analyse the different relational vectors of a SR group, namely the text, the group as a collective, and the group leader. Finally, I consider how SR might be adapted for a HE classroom. Throughout, I evaluate SR as a reflexive pedagogical praxis, analysed through the lenses of emotionally engaged (hooks and Palmer), critical (Freire), and relational (Hickey and Riddle, Gravett, et al.) pedagogies.

Universities have an obligation to consider and prioritise student well-being. This is both a moral responsibility and a practical necessity, as studies suggest that student well-being and emotional connection improves learning (Middendorf et al., 2015, pp. 167–168; Stack, 2024, p. 9). This emphasis on the importance of student well-being is by no means a new concern; it is rather, part of a much longer (though not necessarily dominant) understanding of learning as a holistic exercise, one that ought to take into account students' whole selves. In the mid-1990s, both bell hooks and Parker Palmer emphasized the need for education to address the wholeness of both students and teachers (hooks, 2014, pp. 14–18; Palmer, 2017, pp. 35–61). hooks was influenced by Paulo Freire's earlier insistence that education ought to address people in their totality, not as receptacles of information or abstract minds but as "people in their relations to the world" (Freire, 1995, p. 81).

While it is important to address the structural and individual factors that impact student well-being at an institutional level, it is also important to consider how academic study itself can be a mechanism for well-being. As a historian, I see my work in direct conversation with a recent intervention by David Stack (2024), which argues that the actual mode and method of historical teaching—regardless of content—can contribute to student well-being. His thesis can be extended to any number of humanities and social science disciplines. Stack's call is "less about innovation per se, and more about increasing [teacher] self-awareness and reflexivity" of how we can "enhance existing practices so that we teach with more well-being" (2024, p. 14). Rather than developing new structures, we can adopt what James Lang calls "small teachings", practices that can be implemented into existing classes without radical redesigns (Lang, 2021, pp. 4–10), but which nonetheless bring well-being to the forefront.

My focus in this article is on methods for infusing well-being into seminar classes. Seminars remain a central component of history teaching in Higher Education. I use 'seminar' to describe a class of fewer than twenty students discussing course content, often primary sources. Seminars are often complemented by lectures with a larger class size. I argue that SR represents a 'small teaching' that could easily be integrated into seminar design, infusing well-being without sacrificing critical analysis. While SR tends to focus on literary sources—poetry, fiction, and literary non-fiction—it could be adapted to

almost any textual source. I begin by examining SR as a praxis, then I consider if and how SR can be adapted for use in university, drawing on my experience as both a history lecturer and Shared Reading group leader.

What is shared reading?

Shared reading (SR) can refer to a range of loosely related methods, of which *The Reader's* Shared Reading (which I distinguish with capitalisation) is just one variant. Methods described as SR usually involve a group gathering around a shared text while it is read, either by one person (often the teacher) or chorally. The reading involves regular pauses for discussion. It is particularly used in primary schools and ESL/EFL settings, where studies tend to focus on its effects on literacy and comprehension (Barone et al., 2019; Forssman & Gottwald, 2022; Gibbs & Reed, 2023; Li & Pang, 2025; Lonigan et al., 2008; Neuman & Kaefer, 2018). In this article, I use SR to refer to a specific model of reading and discussion developed in the 2000s by *The Reader* (n.d.-a), a charity based in Liverpool. SR is differentiated from other forms of SR through intent – *The Reader* prioritises emotional connection, well-being, and meaning-making over literacy and comprehension. In addition, although SR can be used with children, it was primarily developed as a well-being intervention with adults.

Whilst *The Reader* may not consider itself to be an educational institution, it has developed a tool that very much constitutes pedagogical practice. SR, as a form of praxis, reflects Freire's (1995, pp. 65–66, 87–88) theories and principles for transformative pedagogy. It is a social practice of communal reading which encourages participants to build emotional connections with themselves, with the text, and as a group. I chose *The Reader's* model because it offers a well-articulated and carefully theorised method of group reading and discussion with proven positive impacts on well-being. In addition, I trained as an SR group leader in 2017 and have previously volunteered as a group leader. Having thus seen the impact of SR on diverse populations, I felt it was a useful praxis to try and integrate into my teaching.

As a technique, SR is relatively straightforward: participants gather as a group to read a text; group members volunteer to read the text aloud; there are regular and spontaneous pauses to discuss the text; and then the reading carries on. Unlike other forms of book groups, no preparation is necessary, because each member has a copy of the text and the text is read aloud in the group. Reading the text aloud in a group can lower barriers to access and participation¹.

The underlying theory and principles of SR are more complicated but can be summed up in *The Reader's* (n.d.-a) own statement that “[w]e believe that literature’s unique power has the potential to connect individuals, help us feel better and to rebuild lost social bonds”. A 2016 study into the impact of SR, as a whole population mental health intervention, argued that reading and discussing literature aloud together could “trigger access to felt experience at the human core” and provide “a freer, deeper and more mobile way of thinking about” those experiences (Davis et al., 2016, p. 57). SR emphasises

¹ Reading aloud should always be voluntary. It is important, especially from an accessibility point of view, that no one be pressured to read aloud. After each pause the leader should offer if anyone else wants to read; if no one does, the seminar leader can continue to read. *The Reader* has also recently partnered with the University of Nottingham to explore SR and neurodivergence (*The Reader*, n.d.-b), which will hopefully provide further guidance on best practice.

individual and group emotional responses over cognition. Because of this emphasis, SR prioritises the group members' interactions with each other and the text. The author, authorial intent, and historical context are rarely discussed. This last aspect distinguishes SR from an academic seminar, and I shall discuss it in detail later.

SR is partially an attempt to democratise and emotionalise the close reading practices of university literature seminars (Billington & Sperlinger, 2011, pp. 506–508). The aims of the practice and engagement with the texts differ from those of academic inquiry – even academic inquiry in a critical pedagogical mode. Nonetheless, I believe that some of the practices and principles of SR can be implemented in higher education, especially in undergraduate and graduate seminars.

Although SR developed in part as a reaction against 'academic' reading, *The Reader* has maintained connections with academia. Much of the theorisation and evaluation of SR has been conducted in partnership with the Centre for Reading and Life at the University of Liverpool (now Reading for Health and Wellbeing, a project of the Centre for Health, Arts, Society and Environment), especially by Philip Davis and Josie Billington. A recent scoping review found studies of SR being implemented across multiple countries in a range of settings, especially among marginalised and vulnerable populations, including, but not limited to, retirement centres, prisons, mental health settings, and even dementia care homes. These studies connected SR to mental and physical health benefits including positive affect, psychological well-being and quality of life, and positive changes in depressive symptoms, physical pain, and dementia as well as sense of connection, improved memory, attention, mood, and sleep. Moreover, SR studies reported "increased enthusiasm for literature and reading and a richer reading experience" as well as an "improved capacity for mentalization" (Järvholm et al., 2025).

In what follows, I discuss the SR method, as described in the scholarly literature and *The Reader's* own best practice guides. I include my own analysis of 'Reader stories', a collection of interviews and reflections of SR group participants and leaders recounting their experiences, some of which were collected as part of scholarly research, but which are published on *The Reader's* website. These are not neutral descriptions, but rather examples chosen by *The Reader* to showcase their intervention. My goal is not to provide a neutral description of SR groups, or even, necessarily, an analysis of SR. My goal, rather, is to consider the SR methodology as presented by *The Reader's* own sense of best practice in relation to my own pedagogical priorities.

Emotional connection

The core of SR is the importance it places on making emotional connections with the text. SR prioritises felt responses over cognition. When asked to describe the experience of SR, the majority of group members offered emotional and subjective descriptions (Longden et al., 2015, p. 117). They made the text personal by drawing on the language or characters of the text to reflect on their own lives and drawing on their own lives to make sense of the text. Discussing the "existential vulnerabilities" of the characters offered opportunities for group members to think through their own existential vulnerabilities (Kristensen et al., 2025, pp. 8–9).

At the same time, SR is not a therapeutic intervention, in the sense that it is not instrumentalised (Longden et al., 2015, pp. 118–119), and many participants clearly value the centrality of the text (Christiansen & Dalsgård, 2021, pp. 296–298). Even though the

close reading gave participants the opportunity to discuss their own feelings and experiences, they did so through discussion of the text. SR creates a space for participants to reflect on their own existential vulnerabilities, but through the prism of the text. Reflecting the Emily Dickinson poem, SR gives an opportunity to “[t]ell all the truth, but tell it slant” (Dickinson, 1998, no. 1263).

One group member described the process in a way almost entirely at odds with any sense of academic objective empiricism:

[SR] opens the door to be able to speak freely as well about what you think of whatever it is, passage or short story whatever you have read, you know there is, you don’t have to worry about it... you know you put a modern spin on a old story [...] that’s what you are doing you are reading your own bits into it. (Billington et al., 2010, p. 38)

I include the full quote here, because the first half offers important clarification, which I will return to momentarily, but it is the second half that might concern an educator the most: “you put a modern spin on an old story [...] you are reading your own bits into it”. Here the group member describes identifying with a text by creating connections with it. Connections that, to the academic eye, might seem worryingly like self-centred conflation, anachronism, and presentism. Yet, “reading your own bits into it” is not the end in SR. SR uses emotional connection as the starting point, the ground upon which to build inquiry. The group member continued: “It’s amazing with the poems the range of things the different people can see in it and bring out of it”, moving from personal connection to a recognition and appreciation of multi-perspectivity made possible through the shared experience.

The emotional realness at the heart of SR is driven by the text and calls for a constant return to the text. Indeed, the “emotional primacy” of SR sometimes leads to an “inventive attention to the text’s composition [...] that exceeded the typical constraints of academic purism” (Longden et al., 2015, p. 117). Engaging with the text as thinking, feeling beings rather than analytically parsing the text means that group members are not “disassociated” from the text but immersed in it and “getting to the heart of it” (Longden et al., 2015, p. 117). Guided by the group leader, participants use their felt responses to dig more deeply into the text.

As Stack (2024, p. 9) and others argue, creating space for students to emotionally engage with the content has positive effects on student well-being. Equally important, critical analysis can benefit from an emotionally engaged approach (Steenberg et al., 2021, p. 242). A diverse host of theories and pedagogies converge to insist on the importance of researcher/student reflexivity—analysing one’s position in relation to one’s research and reflecting on the shifting and uncertain nature of that position. Critical, decolonial, gender, queer, Black Feminist, womanist, and Indigenous theories, to name just a few, insist that research “is a situated activity that locates the gendered observer in the world”; this observer then engages with sources through the unsheddable lens(es) of their own experience (K. Denzin et al., 2008, p. 5). Not only is this situatedness unavoidable, it is a strength to be embraced, leading to more nuanced insights. In *Indigenous methodologies*, Margaret Kovach connected reflexivity to “self-location”, explaining that self-location “is not only about the questions we ask and how we go about asking them, but who we are in the asking” (Kovach, 2010, p. 142). As a noun, self-location is the understanding and articulation of where we are located in relation to our research, as a

verb, self-location is the reflexive practice of analysing our shifting relationship with our research.

In the multivocal understandings of reflexivity, researchers are invited to explore their emotional responses and consider how their emotional responses are shaped by their lived experiences (Ababneh, 2025, p. 79). Through insisting that lived experience matters, reflexivity speaks to both the marginalised and the privileged. In general, marginalised individuals tend to be more acutely aware of the subjecthood, and have been regularly told that it is wrong, or at least different. By contrast, “privileged” individuals are often less aware of their subjecthood—indeed, exploitative systems like white supremacy, patriarchy, and colonialism thrive when the “privileged” internalise but do not interrogate their subjectivity (Ababneh, 2025, p. 75). Creating space for students to bring their whole beings into the classroom enables them to practice and develop these processes of self-location. As a pedagogical approach, SR in particular makes space for what Pillow calls “uncomfortable reflexivity” which “seeks to know while at the same time situat[ing] this knowing as tenuous” (Pillow, 2003, p. 188). Uncomfortable reflexivity deconstructs a simple narrative of the self by raising questions without answers, by admitting uncertainty and “at times even a failure of our languages and practices” (Pillow, 2003, p. 192). SR gives students space to put the “little stories” of their lives in conversation with the “big stories” of the discipline without diminishing or conflating either (Palmer, 2017, p. 79).

One SR group member described this conversation between the “little stories” of their experience and the “big stories” of the literature:

We’re taking every word and seeing how it fits into our life and how we can use that: can we relate to that character, do we see similarities, do we see differences, if they (characters) don’t have the strength to do that, would we have the strength to do that? It allows us to look back on our life and share bits of our individual journeys and our stories. (Norris, 2021c)

This is something more than an unreflexive appropriation of the text. It more closely resembles what Popa called historical consciousness, which turns the gaze to the student/researcher, asking how the subject can speak to them². Historical consciousness is a process of meaning-making through engagement with history. It requires a sensitivity toward the past, an understanding of the past, and a representation of oneself in relation to the past (Popa, 2022, pp. 174–175). This does not necessarily mean a utilitarian or instrumentalised extraction of lessons from the past. Rather, I think of historical consciousness more in terms of SR’s insistence that literature can “trigger access to felt experience at the human core” (Davis et al., 2016, p. 57).

Radical decontextualisation

The willingness of SR group members to move between ‘emotional primacy’ and ‘inventive attention’ to the text arises in part from a radical decontextualisation of the text. SR group leaders make a point of not discussing the author or the context of the text. If group members seem inclined to discuss either, leaders are encouraged to gently lead

² There are numerous competing definitions of historical consciousness. Here I am using the definition synthesised by Popa in a 2022 review of pedagogical literature.

the conversation back to the text itself. This is an extreme close reading that is likely very different from what might be encountered in most educational settings. SR practitioners see this radical decontextualisation as essential to the SR experience. It allows for a fresh and original engagement with the text, unburdened by previous knowledge or assumptions. This method of close reading also breaks down barriers to access. Prior knowledge, degrees, and certifications are not relevant in an SR space. Whether a participant has a string of Oxbridge degrees or never completed secondary school is irrelevant because SR is about the lived experience of the text on the page read aloud in the group. This levelling is what the group member above referred to when they said that SR “opens the door to be able to speak freely as well about what you think” (Billington et al., 2010, p. 38. Researchers have argued that without this central principle of decontextualisation, SR would become simply another event where social hierarchies are reinscribed through the performance of cultural capital (Kristensen et al., 2025, pp. 8–9).

I see this insistence on decontextualisation as facilitating a kind of disidentification theorised by José Esteban Muñoz, who writes that “[t]o disidentify is to read oneself and one’s own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to “connect” with the disidentifying subject” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 12). For SR group members who struggled at school or were otherwise told that ‘literature’ and ‘culture’ were not ‘for’ them, ignoring context allows for a process of disidentification. At the same time, for someone who was good at school or was otherwise been told that ‘literature’ and ‘culture’ are ‘for’ them, SR asks them to engage with the text as a thinking, feeling being, not through a performance of literariness or cultural capital. In this way, SR has the potential to act as a space of equality.

The emotional engagement and radical decontextualisation I have discussed in this section may seem at odds with academic inquiry, where context is essential. However, as I have shown, the decontextualisation is driven by the desire for equality and disidentification, both essential to critical pedagogy. These same goals could be achieved in different ways in a university seminar without sacrificing discussion of context. In a class I teach on the early modern Mediterranean, I used SR in a seminar focussing on an extract from Juan Latino’s elaborate renaissance epic *Carmen Asturias* (Wright et al., 2014, pp. 341–349). Replete with classical allusions and self-consciously modelled on Virgil’s *Aeneid*, the poem can be daunting to students. I provided historical and authorial context through the lecture and assigned secondary reading and used a well-annotated translation with footnotes which clarified the classical allusions. Since the students should have, in theory, attended the lecture and done the readings, it is appropriate to treat any information given in those forums as shared knowledge. What is more, the context added another layer of humanisation and more opportunities to connect through thinking about the creator’s lived experience, desires, and intents in creating the source.

I approached my small experiment with some trepidation, concerned that the emotional core of the poem might be inaccessible under the Latinate Renaissance style. I found that the SR approach allowed students to admit their confusions and, once we had worked through these confusions together, we were able to dig into the emotions of the author, his audience, and his fictionalised protagonists. I did not follow the radical decontextualisation practiced by *The Reader*, but I ensured that the contextual information was provided as a foundation before the seminar so that the actual SR event could remain as equal and democratic as possible. Without decontextualisation, the onus falls even more on the seminar leader to keep the playing field level. The leader is aided

in this effort through the centrality SR gives to the text. Reading aloud in the session gives voice to the text, it creates a shared event that holds the whole group accountable to the text.

The text

The practice of SR creates a dynamic interplay between the individual, text, and the group. As one group member described the experience of participating in *The Reader's* reading groups:

It's like the text we share is constantly giving and the other person is constantly giving too. So I'm seeing things in a new way, looking at them from a different angle that I've not seen before and it's wonderful.
(Norris, 2021a)

Reading a text aloud together with regular and spontaneous pauses for discussion creates a sense of “liveness” in the group. Through this liveness, “the text becomes a vocal, embodied presence that offers a centre toward which participants can gravitate” (Longden et al., 2015, p. 115). No longer a passive object of study, the text becomes an active subject with which and through which the group members can build relationships.

From a pedagogical perspective, thinking of the text as a group member moves the teacher to the side and places the subject of study in the centre (Palmer, 2017, pp. 103–109). Thinking of the source as a group member creates the possibility of developing a relationship with the text. Students no longer learn and speak about the text. They learn *from* it and speak *with* it. It is a relational approach to knowledge. A relational approach that addresses not just relationships between teachers, students, and peers, which is often the emphasis in relational pedagogy, but also relationships between human and non-human (Gravett et al., 2024, pp. 394–395; Hickey & Riddle, 2024, pp. 3271–3273). A relational approach to the text sends the message that we (as teachers, students, and researchers) are able to be changed by our encounters with the subject.

It is possible that making the source the gravitational centre of the group may also create possibilities to keep anachronism and misinterpretation in check. With a smaller source base to focus on, and space already given to the importance of personal experience, it could be easier to respond to student anachronism with a gentle ‘That’s very interesting, thanks so much for sharing, I wonder if we see that in the text?’, inviting students in without admonishing them. As Palmer argues, “[t]he subject-centred classroom is characterized by the fact that the third thing [the subject] has a presence so real, so vivid, so vocal that it can hold teacher and students alike accountable for what they say and do” (Palmer, 2017, p. 119).

In my classroom experience, I often find it difficult to get students to pin their claims and assertions down to specific evidence. As part of my Postgraduation Certificate in Academic Practice, two of my seminars were observed by colleagues in 2023: one SR, one using a more standard buzz-group approach. While the observer of my buzz-group seminar noted delays and pauses as students flipped through their material, the opposite was true in the SR seminar. SR encouraged students to ground their discussions in the text, referring back to specific lines, and even reading and re-reading them aloud in their comments. In this small comparison, at least, SR made the students more willing to treat the text as a member of the group.

As I discuss in the next section, the group dynamics of SR enable participants to recognise the similarities between themselves and their fellow participants while appreciating the differences. If the source is seen as an active member, then its difference can be seen and appreciated, even as its sameness offers opportunities for meaning-making.

The group

In SR, the group itself becomes a “spontaneous community” where participants can connect with each other on a level playing field. Christiansen & Dalsgård described SR as a “joint investigation of the text” created through “a circling talk” (Christiansen & Dalsgård, 2021, p. 298). The “knitting together” of the group through joint investigation is embodied through “hand movements, silences, yes’s, hmms, and stories about concrete situations” (Christiansen & Dalsgård, 2021, p. 298).

Several studies and group member stories have highlighted how the joint investigation of the text often results in a sense of social equality (Kristensen et al., 2025, p. 7; Longden et al., 2015, p. 117; Norris, 2021b). The shared group encounter with the text has the capacity to reveal unanticipated similarities between group members with very different lived experiences. At the same time, SR made group members acutely aware of their different perspectives (Norris, 2021a). Far from a negative, group members saw this difference as a positive attribute of SR, and one that enabled them to stretch their own understanding (Spurgin, 2015). The SR group experience can generate an innate understanding of perspectivism and one’s own positionality (Norris, 2020).

As a praxis, SR embodies a type of “open learning community” envisioned by bell hooks in *Teaching to Transgress*. An open learning community requires an excitement created through “our interest in one another, in hearing one another’s voices, and recognizing one another’s presence” (hooks, 2014, p. 8). The excitement expressed by group members’ sense of themselves in relation to others and the way SR encourages an “interweaving of both sameness and difference” (Longden et al., 2015, p. 117) reaffirm hooks’ insistence that “[e]xcitement is generated through collective effort” (hooks, 2014, p. 8).

Group members themselves identified a constant inward and outward flow of attention:

You’re digging deep into yourself, you’re searching and you’re helping each other search and you’re sharing your ideas and coming to a meeting point and a conclusion on something. (Norris, 2021d)

The “meeting point” identified by this group member is a kind of emergent thinking that develops through SR. The collective group generates thoughts and ideas that no one member of the group (including and especially the group leader) could on their own. Transcriptions of SR groups frequently demonstrate a collaborative “relay of thinking” (Longden et al., 2015, p. 116). In analysing a transcript and her own experience as a group leader, Esther Harsh described this process: “the group is working on picking up on each other’s thoughts, almost as though one cooperative mind” (Harsh, 2022, p. 8). Because SR groups are collaborative efforts characterised by emergent thinking, each individual can have more confidence to tackle difficult texts, knowing they are not alone (Billington et al., 2010, p. 43).

I often struggle with encouraging students to engage with each other. Too often seminars can resemble something like a tennis match, with individual students responding to my questions and then waiting for the next question. I have found that adopting an SR

approach changes the dynamic in a room. When I bring SR to the classroom, I find that students interact with each other more directly and are more willing to modify their thoughts in response to the observations of their peers.

Longden, et al. point to two characteristic habits of spoken thought that emerge through the dynamic of SR: liveness and creative inarticulacy. Liveness refers to the spontaneous and unpredictable nature of the discussion generated by the interaction between individuals, group, and text (Longden et al., 2015, p. 115). An SR group discussion is a momentary and transitory event, often outside of the ordinary day-to-day (Kristensen et al., 2025, pp. 7–9). Like liveness, creative inarticulacy is a response to the unpredictability of SR. It refers to the pauses, ellipses, gaps, and murmurs that fill SR group transcripts. Participants are grasping for feelings, thoughts, and understanding just beyond their ability to articulate. The creative inarticulacy engendered by SR gives rise to emergent thinking, as one participant trails off, another picks up the thread (Longden et al., 2015, p. 116). Although the SR group is a spontaneous community characterised by emergent thinking, there is no need for homogeneity or even consensus. Participants reflected that SR allowed them to sit with a multiplicity of interpretations with no need for a definite answer. The liveness and creative inarticulacy created through group interaction resonates with Pillow's (2003, p. 188) uncomfortable reflexivity discussed above. SR invites participants to experience what members have called the “gray space” of “a hundred possibilities” made possible through a live encounter with each other and the source (Christiansen & Dalsgård, 2021, p. 298; Norris, 2021c).

In a classroom setting, this level of uncertainty, ambiguity, and working-it-out-together is rare. In my experience, students come to seminar sessions fearful of saying the wrong thing. They are much more likely to admit uncertainty in a one-on-one meeting with me than they are in a group including both myself and their peers. If the capacity to engage in uncomfortable reflexivity is one of the goals a good education, and I think it ought to be, then students need spaces that allow them to think tenuous and ambiguous thoughts—not because their thinking lacks clarity, but because the felt thoughts themselves challenge certainty and articulation. Such a space rarely develops organically. A space of liveness and creative inarticulacy requires careful attention and facilitation by the teacher.

The group leader

The group leader plays a vital role in creating a subject-centred spontaneous community. The space must be safe and welcoming enough to create room for vulnerability, but participants must feel un-footed enough to be pushed outside of their comfort zones and defaults (Longden et al., 2015, pp. 115–116). SR groups are unlike ordinary day-to-day spaces; they uncomfortably disrupt learned responses to reading and ask for emotional engagement. The leader needs to model this unconventional interaction with reading. They need to “do more justice to the text” and “at least point to the places and explore traces of the real” (Harsh, 2022, p. 4). To do this, leaders need to navigate the tension between pressure and encouragement, between guiding and giving space (Ohlsson et al., 2025, p. 49). This means holding the tension between the personal and the text, encouraging individuals to dig deeper, and drawing the group back to the text when it starts to stray (Billington et al., 2010, pp. 36–38).

Group leaders also have a “social-conversational” role (Billington et al., 2010, p. 38) in managing group dynamics and must give as much care and attention to the group as they

do to the text. Leaders must draw hesitant members into the conversation while preventing assertive members from dominating the group (Billington et al., 2010, pp. 34–35). Through paying attention to all the group members, observed leaders elicited “participant contributions which helped whole group understanding” (Billington et al., 2010, p. 34). The leader binds the group together and acts as the collective memory, building connections between thoughts and between group members. Just as SR is an embodied experience, the group leader demonstrates attentive listening through their body language, hand gestures, and facial expressions (Christiansen & Dalsgård, 2021, p. 298). Facilitation is, in short, an essential component. A poorly facilitated group could simply reinforce social and cultural hierarchies and lead to a greater sense of exclusion for some members – especially members from vulnerable populations who have already been told they don’t belong.

Paulo Freire argued that true dialogue requires humility. You cannot engage in dialogue if you are aware of the other’s ignorance but not your own (Freire, 1995, p. 93). In SR, this means that the leader needs to be willing to be surprised by and learn from both the source and the group. This requires that teachers practice and model the kind of uncomfortable reflexivity they hope to inspire in their students. Critical reflexivity enables teachers to improve their practice (Brookfield, 2017, pp. 79–95) and remain emotionally engaged (Palmer, 2017, pp. 35–61).

The leader models this openness through the way they phrase observations and questions. Transcripts of SR groups show the leaders frequently relying on modal language. In one example discussed by Billington, et al., the leader made a small personal observation and then finished by saying “I don’t know if anyone else used to sort of, you know, like...”. This series of phrases that simply trailed off, as indicated by the ellipses in the transcript, prompted another group member to respond in a way that deepened their engagement with the text and their own experience (Billington et al., 2010, p. 46). Far from vacillation, the leader strategically used their “unknowing” as an invitation that opened the text to the group (Steenberg et al., 2021, p. 239). Often, the leader’s questions are open to the point of being incomplete: “Because of the way it is written or ... ?” (Kristensen et al., 2025, p. 9). Even subtle shifts in language can change the direction of the conversation. Asking “Why do you like it?” would lead to explanation, while asking “What do you like about it?” invites an exploration grounded in the specifics of the text (Steenberg et al., 2021, p. 246). This practice of elaboration and digging deeper through shifting questions is similar to Freire’s process of decoding (1995, pp. 105–121). By making observations about the text and using tentative language and tag questions, leaders not only invite participation, they invite group members to disagree and take the interpretation in a different direction (Billington et al., 2010, pp. 46–47).

Many transcripts show the leader making only small interventions, saying much less than other group members. Often in moments of emergent thinking, the leader does little more than offer affirmations (Steenberg et al., 2021, pp. 244–246). Much of the work is done through rephrasing points made by group members or simply picking up and repeating small phrases like “Hmm, yes, [quoting group member] “restless”...” (Harsh, 2022, p. 5), which invites the original speaker to dig deeper, or another member to take up the thread. Where transcripts show the leader speaking at more length, they are often building on the momentum of the group and tying together observations of multiple group members (Harsh, 2022, p. 5).

As a teacher, my instinct is to quickly jump in and correct misinterpretations and inaccurate connotations. SR offers a different approach. Group members are still held accountable to the text, but in a way that keeps the conversation open. As hooks explains, recognising “the uniqueness of each voice” and creating spaces “where all voices can be heard” because students know “their presence will be recognised and valued” is not the same thing as giving every idea equal weight and importance (hooks, 2014, p. 186). SR group leaders’ comments frequently follow a formula of affirming a group member’s contribution, opening it to the wider group, and drawing attention back to the text. This formula pushes the group members further into uncertainty and out of their comfort zones:

I think this [quoting group member] “unspoken underneath” is important. What area of the text did you feel it the most? (Harsh, 2022)

Here, the leader repeated the group member’s observation and legitimised it as ‘important’ before pushing for more. This method can be used to great effect to constructively and gently insist that group members add clarity and precision to their analysis:

Ah, [quoting group member] “deflecting it”. Deflecting it ... what is he deflecting, do you think? (Harsh, 2022)

SR invites us to make our questions as open as possible and to make friends with silence. As teachers, we are likely deeply familiar with the text and the context, and our academic training is to provide explanation and analysis, but open questions only works if we give students time to ponder them. Along with the students, teachers need to feel comfortable with creative inarticulacy. SR demands that teachers and students alike shed the habitus of confidence for something more authentic. Only by modelling authenticity can we invite students into a place of authentic engagement with the text (hooks, 2014, p. 21).

The success of an SR group relies on many factors, but one of the most important, and one of the most controllable, is the group leader. As both a method and a theory, SR praxis envisions a horizontal relationship between leaders and group members of a kind aspired to by critical and relational pedagogy (Freire, 1995, p. 91). In a classroom setting, it would be wrong to pretend that no power imbalance exists but, as bell hooks reminds us, it is what we do with that power that matters (hooks, 2014, pp. 186–187). Teachers need to approach their classes with an authenticity and willingness to learn from the experiences of their students (hooks, 2014, pp. 21, 84–86). SR offers a practical technique for embodying this approach and one which, I think, can be adapted to the demands of the university classroom.

Further considerations and conclusion

An SR group, as I have described it, may not seem all that different from many more conventional academic seminars. After all, SR is an attempt to bring the best parts of a close reading literature seminar to the wider world. I have sought to highlight these similarities by analysing SR through a collage of pedagogical theories. Adopting and adapting a SR approach in a university seminar is a small change with potentially powerful effects. Fundamentally, SR pushes for an equality between teacher and student by:

- 1) Decentring the teacher and recentring the encounter between the students and the text.
- 2) Valuing the lived experiences of individual participants by believing that those lived experiences can speak to the text and vice versa.

These are values similarly expressed in critical, engaged, and relational pedagogy. SR offers one technique, but by no means the only technique, for embodying these values in the classroom.

Still, SR was not developed for university seminars, and modifications would be required. There are practical aspects to consider when implementing SR in the history classroom. First, *The Reader* usually suggests groups of between 2-12 people though that upper limit can be stretched. This makes it ideal for most history seminars but pressures to increase class sizes appear to be mounting, and any group larger than fifteen students would need more adaptation to implement SR. Second, the SR model drastically reduces the amount of material that can be covered in a typical fifty-minute seminar. *The Reader's* groups are usually 1.5 hours and probably average around four pages of text. This means that, in common with other active learning approaches, the sources used in a SR seminar need to be chosen for brevity and depth, offering an intense microcosm of the themes developed in lectures and assigned readings. Finally, SR is a long-term intervention. Although my experience has shown that one-off SR sessions can be useful, SR sessions build on each other. In Harsh's study, for example, the first real 'breakthrough' moment came in the tenth week, after multiple false starts (Harsh, 2022, pp. 5-6). To fully benefit from SR, a seminar teacher would need to incorporate some SR—even if only twenty minutes—every week.

Since SR is largely about moving academic best practice outside the university, little research has been conducted on implementing SR in classes. The exception is a recent study that found SR could promote reading engagement amongst upper-level secondary school students in Sweden, but this was predicated on the lack of assessment (Ohlsson et al., 2025). The lacuna creates important opportunities for further research. It is worth considering the following questions in relation to applying SR in HE contexts: Teacher-student power dynamics are inevitably different from volunteer leader-group participant dynamics. Can the same types of equality be achieved in a traditionally academic space? How does the teacher need to modify SR to address these dynamics? What additional culturally specific norms of interaction does a teacher need to be aware of (hooks, 2014, pp. 186–189)? How should a teacher balance the call for emotional connection with the fact that university teachers cannot and should not be the main source of pastoral care for students (Stack, 2024, pp. 1–6)? There is research to suggest that affective engagement leads to improved critical analysis (Steenberg et al., 2021, p. 242), which has also been seen specifically in students engaged with SR (Billington & Sperlinger, 2011, pp. 508–511), but little research has examined the effect of SR on the production of something like an undergraduate research essay. While research essays are not the only, nor even necessarily the most vital, form of assessment, understanding the interplay between SR and research essays would be very useful in deciding how and where to implement SR in university.

SR groups almost exclusively use literature—poetry, fiction, plays, and literary nonfiction—but the SR model could use almost any kind of textual source, from a historical primary source to an extract of a scholarly article, so long as it has potential for

felt human connection. Ray Bradbury's definition of the 'literary' in *Fahrenheit 451* offers good criteria for a SR source:

To me it means texture. This book has pores. It has features. This book can go under the microscope. You'd find life under the glass, streaming past in infinite profusion. The more pores, the more truthfully recorded details of life per square inch you can get on a sheet of paper, the more "literary" you are [...] Telling detail. Fresh detail. (Bradbury, 2004)

One of my favourite sources to teach is the estate inventory of a woman named Altun who died in Jerusalem c. 1391 (Lutfi, 2021, p. 37). In a few terse lines of bureaucratic prose, the document records the penniless life of a woman who lived in charity housing and had little more to her name than the clothes on her back. It is a sparse and easily summarised administrative document, but lingering over it and digging into it with an SR ethos reveals texture and porosity, a profound literariness of detail. Juan Latino's *Carmen Asturias*, extracts of which I have used in SR, could not be more different from Altun's estate inventory, but both texts are obscure and difficult to penetrate. They require significant contextualisation to make sense of. At first glance they might seem inaccessible, but put them under the microscope of SR, and they are quickly shown to be teeming with life.

There are many ways of conducting an academic seminar that might lead to the kind of cognitive-affective responses, equality, and subject-centred discussion I have introduced here. In the end, specific techniques are less important than the authenticity and integrity with which the teacher approaches their class (Palmer, 2017, pp. 1–34). I have colleagues who can maintain an open and welcoming environment while more directly challenging student misconceptions, but I know that for my personality, the gentle yet firm approach of SR offers a new and refreshing way in. My goal in discussing SR has not been to be prescriptive, but to point to SR as a practice that is adaptable to the classroom, is relatively easy to implement, and which has a proven positive impact on well-being. Is it possible to introduce these well-being impacts without sacrificing academic rigour? My analysis of SR through theoretical and pedagogical lenses argues that it is.

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