

## The Slow Reading Ethnography Experiment

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### Abstract

While much has been published in anthropological discourse and teaching forums about the skills, practices and positionality of ethnographic writing, very little attention has been paid to the practices and experiences of ethnographic reading. Our project set out to investigate the potential for ‘slow reading’ within anthropological pedagogy. We invited anthropology undergraduates to select a book and engage in a period of slow reading over the vacation, before reporting back on their experiences through a focus group discussion. Students found that their ideals for slow reading were hard to realise, and we learned about the importance of appropriate spaces, times, and communities in practices of reading ethnography.

### Key Words

Reading, anthropology, mental health, non-extractive, slow reading

### Introduction

Reading well is all too often treated as an invisible part of the pedagogical infrastructure, only becoming visible when something goes wrong – when students don’t do the reading, or can’t seem to get what was hoped from it. This may reflect a broader presumption in academic teaching that learning to read is something that has already been addressed much earlier in the pedagogical process (Bharuthran and Clarence 2015). Even when things go wrong, the problem is often addressed through attending to the students’ understanding of the conceptual content of readings, rather than considering how reading practices themselves might be supported as part of the solution: Where and when do students read? For how long? How quickly? Do they annotate, or take notes, how, and how many? Do they read whole texts, or passages? Do they use digital applications, or paper books?

These questions are relevant to all higher education, yet there is also something specific about ethnographic reading that warrants even more concerted attention. Since the 1980s, we have a critical understanding that the textual form of our discipline has impacts on the forms of knowledge that can be produced as an ethnographic fieldworker and an anthropological writer. It is notable, though, that very little has been published about the practices and experiences of engaging with anthropological texts as a reader. A common aim among those who teach anthropology is that students are supported in reflecting on their own lives, or rethinking their previous presumptions, by engaging with ethnographic reading about others, while also developing a critical interest in the lens through which the author portrays their subject/s. This sort of understanding is not always easy - academically, or personally (e.g. Diallo and Friborg 2021), yet the technical matter of how students ought to practice reading in order to forge careful engagements with the texts and the discipline is rarely approached.

One exception is Michael Lambek’s call for slow reading within anthropological pedagogy (2020). Lambek’s call resonates with an emerging movement among historians, literary scholars, and philosophers, advocating for slow reading. (Baldi and Mejia 2023, Mikicks 2013, Walker 2016). While there is variety in the precise aims and practices recommended as ‘slow reading’, a common feature of those advocations is a concern that readers are too used to absorbing snippets of information quickly from multiple media channels at one time, rather than sitting with a text for longer periods of time to achieve depth of understanding.

Lambek's particular concerns are that anthropology students' writing skills will suffer if they do not learn to read in the right way, and he fears that reading skills are being eroded in part by technological development, and in part by the impact of student's preferences on teaching formats. He says,

Evans-Pritchard's supreme Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande is [now] taught in abridged form. The original doesn't sell because instructors don't assign it: instructors don't assign it because students won't read it. Students won't read it for "lack of time" and for want of sufficient attention span. There is a risk that the works that do sell pander to these students. 2020: 63

We agree with Lambek's assertion that good writing depends upon good reading, and we share an interest in how reading formats shape reading practices (particularly relevant since the digitalisation of so many resources following Covid19). Yet our slow reading experiment set out with different set of concerns in mind. Lambek's aim seems principally to conserve or restore a previous standard of artful reading and writing, while ours is more progressive and experimental in outlook. We sought to conduct our slow reading experiment to support our students in thinking about what it really means, for anthropologists-in-training to read well, in today's world?

This brings our project more in line with geographer and anti-colonialist researcher, Max Liboiron. Liboiron's concerns are that academic reading can become an 'extractive' process:

We are taught to mine texts for what we want, what we need (for other modes of reading, see Dumit 2012). It is a consumptive mode that uses texts like a resource rather than collaborating with them or being otherwise accountable to the ideas, the authors, the publishers, other readers. 2020: 95

For Liboiron, this was particularly a concern when reading indigenous authors. Liboiron draws on Eva Tuck's Twitter posts about 'settler readers' (2017) to raise concerns about forms of reading that use texts, and so authors, to support and add value to readers' own positions, rather than to draw meaningful reappraisals, collaborations, or shifts in schemes of value.

Our project is based at Cambridge University. Here, students receive and contribute to a thorough, careful and continually evolving education in understanding the political positionalities of ethnographic methods and anthropological writing (Mogstad and Tse 2018<sup>1</sup>). However, students also navigate long lists of recommended readings and short timescales for producing essays to discuss in supervision - supervisions are regular meetings, with a ratio of between one and three students per supervisor. Supervisions usually take the format of setting and discussing formative essays related to material from lectures and readings. Recommended readings are provided both by lecturers and supervisors. It is clearly communicated that students are not expected to cover all of the suggested readings, but the cumulative impact can be a sense in which there is a superfluency of possible reading and a paucity of time, such that reading is selected and handled tactically and efficiently as a tool for upcoming essays and eventual exams. Beyond the short terms and work requirements at Cambridge, broader contemporary educational contexts contribute to a sense of assessment-oriented, time-poor reading, particularly given the rising number of students who work alongside their studies. We have on occasion heard students advise one another to 'skim for the meaty bits' and that they can try '*using* the X [book title, author name, or even group of people] to support your argument'. While these fragments are not representative of individual or cohort attitudes towards authors or interlocutors, we felt it was relevant to consider whether reading in a different way – not directly linked to assessment, and without time pressure – would lead anthropology undergraduates to reflect differently on their reading relationships with the text, with the authors and with the people depicted in writing.

A second reason for experimenting with reading format is the rising national and international concerns over student mental health at universities (Brown 2018, Chen and Lucock 2022). Poor mental health can affect students' capacity to concentrate (Eisenberg et al 2009), which may make reading particularly challenging. On the other hand, students who are struggling to engage with reading (e.g., not finishing it, not finishing quickly enough, or not understanding it as they read it) may subsequently become self-critical, poorly motivated, stressed or anxious. At Cambridge, students are supported by a highly developed pastoral system within colleges and also services to support students' mental wellbeing are provided centrally by the University. However, Cambridge also carries high expectations in terms of student workload, within relatively short terms, and students can feel under

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<sup>1</sup> While our experiences of decolonialism at Cambridge differ in some respects from those of Mogstad and Tse (2018), their account nonetheless demonstrates the liveliness of critical reflection underway.

pressure to excel given the prestige of the institution. In order to improve accessibility and student wellbeing, Cambridge works hard to counter ‘imposter syndrome’. It is plausible that imposter syndrome, negative self-judgement, stress, anxiety, or lack of motivation may occur during solitary reading time, particularly when students feel the reading isn’t being understood well or covered quickly enough in relation to upcoming tasks. On the other hand, recent research suggests that recreational reading, autonomously pursued, can have positive impacts on Canadian college students’ mental health (Levine et al, 2022). We hoped, then, to provide a supportive space in which students could discuss how it felt to engage with reading, with the aim of building understanding about the relationships between different reading forms and mental wellbeing.

In sum, while Lambek’s call for slow reading was a call to preserve or restore the waning art of academic reading and writing, our interest in slow reading is slightly different. We set out to begin to figure out what sort of reading practices are best fit for a new age – an age of continual decolonisation of the academy and rising requirements to rethink pedagogical systems with mental health in mind.

## Method

We set out to provide an opportunity to read in a way that was non-directive, non-teleological, and had no time pressures or curriculum links. We were interested to see whether students would engage differently with texts (and with themselves, as readers) if they read ethnography following only their own interests and at their own pace. Our project was approved by the ethics committee of the Social Anthropology Department. We made it clear that taking part in the slow reading experiment was an optional activity, that would gain no credit or favour within their courses of study. We advertised for volunteers to join our program via flyers that were distributed to undergraduate mailing lists via the Social Anthropology department and the Cambridge University Social Anthropology Society (CUSAS). We held an ‘after hours’ meeting at The Haddon Library of anthropology and archaeology, at which we chatted with students about why they were interested in taking part in our experiment, and answered any questions they had about what was involved. Fifteen students attended. At the event, we set out two large pieces of paper and pens. Each piece of paper was divided into ‘Slow Reading’ and ‘Not Slow Reading.’ We chose the latter term so as not to be overly deterministic about the contrasts that mattered to students. One piece of paper asked ‘How’ and the other asked ‘Why’. Our aim with this exercise was to find out more about how students envisioned Slow Reading, leaving space for students to have different reasons for participating, or different modes of participating, than those that we had envisioned (see results below). We discussed the outcome of this exercise as a whole group, and then students were supported by us and by one another in finding a text that piqued their interest from the shelves of The Haddon or online. We invited students to join a WhatsApp group so that we could share experiences and reflections about reading over the vacation. After the vacation, we ran a focus group to discuss our experiences, which six students attended. The discussion was recorded on Dictaphone and transcribed. Those who were unable to make the focus group were invited to submit their experiences by email.

## Key Findings

### *What do we mean by Slow Reading?*

The table below shows the responses that students contributed to the collective exercise at The Haddon:

	<b>Why?</b>	<b>How?</b>
Slow Reading	Experiencing a text as a narrative Enjoyment Holistic understanding To contextualise the theoretical framework better Reading as an experience in itself, not a means to an end Reading without bias, being more open to the text To have a greater impact on me as a reader More reflection on how the author came to a particular conclusion	Like a fiction book, flowing Read the whole book Without a specific topic/end goal Intentional With breaks to think Without pressure (time, intellectual) More spontaneously Annotating, but without summarising for a particular purpose

NOT Slow Reading	Efficiency To better elucidate or understand something <i>else</i> (e.g. theoretical framework, another text) To read more different texts in a given time Extracting information For a deadline	Scanning Keyword searching Stress Speed Reading Read the conclusion but not how the event unfolded Not going back to clarify Treating the text as though some information is irrelevant Skimming With one direction
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While many students’ contributions harmonised with our initial aims for the experiment (e.g. to read without deadlines), they had also raised some points we were not anticipating. For example, reading a *whole* ethnographic monograph ‘cover to cover’ was important to several students. Also, while we had set out to provide experiences of reading ethnography that could be distinct from academic achievement, in fact, students were motivated by the idea that reading in this way would improve their understanding of anthropological theory and their analytical skills. Students therefore bucked both the expectations of them posed by Lambek’s piece (which depicted students as unwilling to sit with whole texts) and by us (who underestimated students’ own desire for academic progress). On both counts, the particular cohort is relevant – not only a high achieving cohort (by dint of being at Cambridge), but also a sub-set who had volunteered to take part in an additional reading project during the vacation. Their particular enthusiasm for Slow Reading as a technique for personal academic progress may well not be representative of other cohorts – that warrants further investigation.

### After the Vacation:

#### *A (Missing) Sense of Purpose*

At the start of our focus group, one student admitted, sheepishly, that they hadn’t stuck with their initial book. The other students seemed relieved by this confession and four more proclaimed that they, too, had switched. They had switched onto books that were recommended within the courses they would be taking the following term. When asked why, they described being preoccupied with the sense that they were wasting time when reading their initial ‘free-choice’ books, and preferred to read in a way that was, as one student put it ‘enjoyable *and* productive’. Students described feeling that they had a better sense of purpose reading books that would tie into the course<sup>2</sup>.

Our initial presumption had been that reading would be less stressful if not tied to workload. But in fact, students described reading in a directed and purposeful way could be soothing. One student said, “If I do nothing productive during the day, I can read a few pages of my slow reading book and then at least I’ve done something mildly productive.” In another students’ words, reading something that was productive towards academic success could be “sort of an academic kind of fun.”

What is more, they found the experience of reading without the structure of course organisation carried its own stresses:

The reading bit was –the feeling that I’m really struggling. It’s going really slowly, forgetting that’s the point. I don’t know – not having a deadline is something very different than what I’m used to, and so I almost felt like I was putting deadlines in front of myself to complete them first. So every chapter or every few pages, I had to do in one sitting which was a little bit weird. I mean, to just read and have no endpoint and just stop where I need to was a difficult like learned thing almost.

Several students reflected on their initial presumptions that reading ‘for its own sake’ would feel fulfilling and self-motivating. In fact, they had found they infused a sense of purpose into their reading, through deadlines and

<sup>2</sup> A resonant pressure/need for productivity impacts on staff as well as students’ experiences of reading: One of us (Rosie) found that, when joining students in the Slow Reading experiment, she felt she ought to write a book review on her text to make the time spent reading slowly ‘worthwhile.’

self-discipline, a sense of their own development as anthropologists, or links to upcoming course syllabus, without which the reading would not feel so worthwhile.

## **Judging Oneself**

While reading with purpose could be fulfilling, students also judged themselves, sometimes harshly, while reflecting on themselves as readers. The student who set themselves deadlines (above) reported feeling disappointed in themselves for not being fulfilled by reading that book, for its' own sake, and others nodded in agreement. During our discussion, other's mentioned being disappointed at themselves for reading too slowly ("it shouldn't take *this* long!") too quickly ("finding myself skimming or skipping yet again"), and for not being absorbed by the texts in the ways they had hoped. For one student, not being absorbed by the ethnography was a sign to her that she may not be taking the right course:

When I found myself not very motivated, found myself not really being able to fully engage with the material, not fully being able to engage with the context and the characters, I guess I saw it as a sign that if it wasn't for the academic pressures making me engage with anthropology, I might not be able to engage with it myself. And that's why it became a stressful thing.

This desire for depth and immersion in ethnographic reading may mirror more familiar anthropological desires for depth and immersion in ethnographic writing and in fieldwork encounters (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Such ideals may be too narrow in the way they portray 'real' anthropology/anthropologists, which might make some students feel a fragile sense of belonging within the discipline, or lead to self-doubt and imposter syndrome. Therefore, ideals of what makes a 'real' anthropological reader (depth, immersion, focus, motivation, speed, ease) warrant further investigation and may even warrant pedagogical remediation.

## **Finding What Works**

Students described experimenting with the ways in which they read. This included trying out different times and places for reading, with each confirming that these aspects were important to their success and experience of reading, but with no consensus reached as to the ideal reading environment. One student preferred to read in the living areas of the house when nobody was home, but found this hard to arrange. Another didn't mind reading in her bedroom, but found the quiet of being alone stifling, so tried opening windows and playing music to feel less alone. One student described how the desire to read away from screens became thwarted when he found himself wanting to take more notes than he had anticipated, and wanting those notes to be searchable. In an attempt to stop herself skimming and rushing, one reader used an audio describe app, but was frustrated by needing to pause or replay sections. Another said pencilling notes onto a paper book would have felt most natural and useful, but given it was a library copy, he ended up with a lot of Postit notes that he would probably never read again. Still, he felt, the Postit process had helped him engage more deeply in the book and be less distractable than reading on a laptop. Several students discussed the problem of being distracted by social media or by the internet. This contributed to some of the self-judgement discussed in the previous section. One student described placing the phone on a particular shelf where it would be left alone, and setting himself time limits. Another talked about an app that could mute social media while you were working, he had researched the app but had not actually used it. While they each came to different conclusions about exactly how to overcome the pragmatic challenges of reading well, a common feature was that they had all learned something new about themselves as a reader, and their environmental requirements for reading well, during the experiment.

## **Non-Extractive Reading**

The term 'extractive' was used by students in the discussion frequently, to refer to a form of reading that they tried to avoid. When asked to explain exactly what they meant by the term 'extractive', one student explained that reading extractively would mean "pulling bits out, chopping what you need, for one particular purpose." Other students seemed to agree, and one explained this further in relation to note taking practices. Extractive reading involved having a 'split screen' (the text on one half and a word document on the other), and copy/pasting sections from the reading into the note document. This was indicative of 'grabbing' what is needed from the text rather than taking the time to engage with it more fully. A less extractive note taking form, he felt, would involve re-phrasing the notes in one's own words, and taking notes about a range of topics and lines of engagement,

rather than in line with one particular aim (an upcoming essay, for example). When asked if extractive reading was necessarily a problem, students explained that it was a more stressful way to read, as it belied either lack of time or 'bad habits' and led to a thinner understanding of the text, which could then be anxiety-inducing in relation to assessments.

Despite a seeming consensus around the idea that slow reading *had* encouraged them to try out non-extractive styles of reading, surprisingly, this didn't lead students to report experiencing a different relationship with those written about within the texts. When asked about this, the students explained that they felt the style and quality of ethnographic writing was more of an influence on the way they reflected on their relationship with the author's interlocutors. One student acknowledged that they had felt more moved toward deep respect for those in the text by some of their term-time reading when compared to their slow reading book – the difference, she felt, was the subject matter and the authorial skill. However, the slow reading project had encouraged one student to think about what it means to be a reader (of any speed/sort) in relation to those written about:

There's something so existentially dreadful about the fact that you're reading, because my book is also not the most cheerful of topics, that at any point you can just kind of close a book, walk away and you know your relationship with the subjects and the material and the topics is entirely on your own terms. You've chosen to read the book and engage with it and you can also choose to withdraw yourself from it, and you can also choose to keep it within you and think about it longer. But it is entirely your decision. It's not a conversation. And no matter how you might feel that the characters are speaking to you, they're not. You're the one giving them the voice.

Therefore, while slow reading itself had mixed reviews in terms of aiding reflexive consideration of one's relationship to those in the text, the experiment as a whole led to interesting and provocative discussion about positionality, readership and texts.

### **Community of Readers**

Several readers spoke about feeling isolated when reading their books, when compared to term time reading where they can discuss their readings with peers. Conversations with other readers were missed when readers found their books particularly interesting or moving, and equally, when they found them unclear or dull. Students began to compare our reading project, not with their usual term-time reading, but with a newly-designed course that some of them were taking. In this course, students all read the *same* book (alongside other relevant reading suggestions), each covering the same part of the book weekly, before meeting to discuss it in a seminar. This discussion within a community of readers of the same text was felt to add real value in terms of motivation, fulfilment and depth of engagement (when compared to the breadth of readings they might cover as a cohort in other modules), and this sense of reading community was felt missing in the Slow Reading experiment.

It was not just that other readers could help students to connect with the text, it was also that reading could help people to feel connected to one another. Students' discussions about the benefits of collective reading within their new course resonated with how a group of geographers at the University of Newcastle recently wrote about their reading group as cultivating a 'caring collective' through practices of 'commoning' (Ey et al, 2020). In our experiment, such community became particularly clear in its absence, one student talked about having an 'atrocious' time at home at Christmas. His slow reading had helped him feel connected to Cambridge, which was bitter-sweet:

There's kind of a longing really because it's so far away and also there's such a disjunction between the types of people that you're around [at home] as well. And so when I'm reading this it's partly like being in Cambridge again, but actually really lonely at the same time.

Students' comments suggest that developing supportive, communal reading practices could be a significant bolster against isolation, self-doubt and self-judgement. Students reflected that having been left alone to read *freely* (their choice of book, at their own pace, with no linked output) they had come to realise that rather than pursuing Slow Reading, or 'free reading', further, they wanted to pursue a form of reading that was built around purpose, community and care.

## Conclusions

We had set out with the presumption that there was likely to be benefits to mental wellbeing and to readers' ethical/political engagement with texts if we provided the opportunity for them to read ethnography without the pressure of essay deadlines and assessments. In fact, we learned that such an idea of anthropological Slow Reading can play into an ideal in which reading is self-directed, immersive, fulfilling and spontaneously ethically/politically profound. Such an ideal is hard to live up to, particularly in a media-saturated world of distractions, which can lead to self-judgement. Our experiment showed that even high achieving students can hold negative self-judgements when reading, relating to concentration span, comprehension, and speed (too fast and/or too slow). A key concern for pedagogues is how to support students in the development of self-discipline and concentration span without worsening experiences of personal failure or imposter syndrome.

One suggestion might be to look for the times in the academic year most favourable to deep, engaged, unhurried reading; though we caution against utilising the vacations for reading given students may have work and caring responsibilities, and given our findings that suggest students might feel isolated when reading outside of term-time, especially if it isn't going well. One potentially useful practice is the collective 'deep reading' advocated by anthropologists Stale Wig and Nafissa Naguib at the University of Oslo (2021). Their practice involved actually sitting with student cohorts for extended periods of time (six hours) and reading together, in silence, with phones on flight mode: they report positive results for their students, and we wonder if practices like theirs may have positive impacts on structuring academic reading time, too. Following our students' reflections on isolation and challenges in self-discipline, we feel forms of collective reading practice akin to Wig and Naguib's is worthy of further investigation, though our students' very personal and varied comments on productive reading environments warrant caution in overgeneralising solutions. On top of contributing to negative self-judgements, the ideal of slow reading (as autonomous, immersive reading that is 'between you and the book') does not account well enough for the way reading is supported and shaped by relationships to people, places and notions of purpose and/or progress. While we had thought slow reading could work as a contrast to extractive reading practices, in fact, slow reading can play into an ideal of complete immersion and comprehension that mirrors romanticist ideals about direct fieldwork encounters.

In sum, while Slow Reading may be envisioned as an unmeetable or unhelpful ideal, at the same time, it seems pertinent for pedagogues to think carefully about how *much* time ought to be allocated for reading so that students have the best chance of carefully engaging with texts, and with themselves as readers. Such a consideration sits well with other academic calls to 'slow down' academia (e.g. O'Niell 2017), as part of a feminist resistance against unsustainable demands for high productivity (Moutz et al, 2015), and as a way to counter anxiety (O'Niell 2014). That said, just as Luke Martell (2014) questions whether 'slowness' is *necessarily* the right counter to problems in contemporary academia, we also found that students' reading challenges were not alleviated simply by more time, and more freedom. We did not find a student cohort that was unwilling to sit with difficult or lengthy texts (as in Lambek's concerns), but we did find that doing so was not an easy task – there were personal, academic, cognitive and environmental challenges which meant expectations were hard to meet. This meant we felt it was not just 'slow', but appropriately *supported* reading, which was required. We found that supportive, reflective group discussions about reading techniques, reading environments, and reading ideals (not just reading content) could aid pedagogical reflection on the often-invisible practices and demands of anthropological reading. We recommend making space for such discussions within anthropological curricula, as this is likely to be beneficial for student mental wellbeing and for enabling careful and caring engagement with texts and with those who write them or are depicted within them.

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