



People become mini-poets of their own lives'

An interview with Prof. Dr. Phil Davis

Prof. Dr. Phil Davis is Head of the Centre for Research into Reading, Information and Linguistic Systems, at the University of Liverpool's Institute of Psychology, Health and Society. He has done research on Shared Reading in a variety of contexts, including dementia and prison settings.

LC: The Shakespeare Brain, your research in 2011 got world attention. Looking back, do you get the strongest arguments for Shared Reading from brain imaging?

Phil Davis: I can describe the brain-imaging but I should say this first: it divides people. The ones who hate it, find it reductive, as if you could look at the brain saying that's the God part, that's the love part. I don't want to go with that. It is very important in our brain research that it matches at the level of real life. So for example, we are interested in the brain research about reading not being automatic: left to right, easily along the line. And you can see, for example, in eyetracking the same thing happening. People fixate on a word, they pause. It's crucial when the reader is not just automatically scanning a text, running along from left to right to gather information like reading a manual. Literature doesn't do that. Not that it wants to be difficult, or it wants you to be clever, it just want to go deeper. It wants to be something where you have to think... and a different part of the brain is called into being.

LC: Literature evokes something... it is getting us out of our own comfort zone?



'Literature wants you to get deeper.'

PD: Indeed, reading literature is not straightforward and not just processing. It gets you out of *default* mode. That's to say you don't just have your habitual opinions. On the level of behaviour people just say: 'Well, I just think that...' and it doesn't matter what they are going to say after that because it's going to be their set opinions. What happens later is that a variety of people across different backgrounds intuitively use the expression 'Well, it's almost as if...' That's where they begin to think in a more speculatively in a way that I would call more literate. So, the brain-imaging is to do with those moments when you leave alone 'I know what is going to happen' when everything is on auto-pilot. Suddenly you're traveling into the unknown.

LC: And here we get Shakespeare on stage and the effects his sonnets have on our brains...

PD: We can set up a real poem versus a prose paraphrase of it. With the last one not much is happening, just the ordinary stuff in the brain. But at key moments in the poetry as you cross a line or come across an unusual word suddenly there's a switch, a shift. No more automatic, something is lifting up, struggling for recognition. In those moments, I would say, the brain is more activated, more excited and above all more alive. It's not about just the fancy sights of brain imaging which is in its infancy, but it's trying to pick up, at deep neurophysical levels, signs of sudden life coming into being, triggered by literary texts which replicate powerful situations in human existence.

LC: We are talking about the impact of what you often describe as "serious literature". But what exactly is that?

Phil Davis: In England we have adverts for Carlsberg, saying that 'Carlsberg reaches the parts other beers don't reach'. Serious literature begins to get to the places that you don't normally think about, or you think about in only generalised ways. Serious literature is a way of being able to trigger serious thinking about your own life, about human existence. If we were able to talk more openly, to feel more powerfully, to remember more accurately, we might not need literature. Literature is that other mind that stimulates us in a world where it is often difficult to remember things, or to have time to think about things. It stimulates that area that holds human existence and enables you to re-imagine it, to re-feel it and to think 'What was going on'? And the fact that it's analogous that it is not necessarily your own experience but something close to it, means that it is not just identification, you're working actively.

I give an example: an English poem written by Robert Herrick, 16th century, about being in love and wanting to love your beloved. In Liverpool, 21st century, a not very well educated man likes this poem, written 400 years ago. He likes it not

because he has had all those feelings of love, but because he has wanted to. So sometimes it is not to do with the fact that you identify, that you are that person, but it has to do with the things you haven't had. That might be what *imagination* is: that you can appreciate and value -because you haven't had them- the things that you would want.

LC: So sometimes it's not just because what has happened to you, but because what has not happened to you.

Phil Davis: Right. During the research we film a shared reading group and we find a moment in which somebody does something wonderful and show that excerpt back to the person and we see what they think in terms of looking at themselves doing this quick transient thing.

I think that it's very important that literature takes us out of our norms, because our norms are not usually as good as we really are deep inside. When literature can show somebody reacting from a deep part of themselves, and that they then substantively can see the deep part of themselves, I don't care whether that's called research or not. What I can see is something in human beings, creatively released by the poem, that is worthy of respect.

LC: Shared Reading can be a sort of benchmark for how somebody might think of themself in future.

Phil Davis: Participants look at themselves in a session and say 'I like that person' or 'After the session the world felt a bit sunnier to me.' That is research. Because we can show in the film why we think this a breakthrough, we can examine their language, we can examine the language of what they say and respond to it.

The basic thing is to see people going beyond their norm and suddenly revealing the sort of human power of emotion and expression that poets themselves reveal in poems. *People become mini-poets of their own lives.* That's all at its best research should show: individuals doing that.

LC: Research has always been an important factor in the development of The Reader. We can learn from the work that's been done at CRILS. Luckily we, Het Lezerscollectief, also have something to offer...

Phil Davis: In order to spread Shared Reading in England, Jane had to reinvent the model to include volunteers to spread the word. One of the great models for that volunteering initiative - I know- was what she saw in Belgium. You are the great country for volunteers. So thank you Belgium!

LC: Those are nice words to toast on our collaboration! (Het Lezerscollectief is an official partner of The Reader and part of the International Center for Shared Reading for Flanders and the Netherlands since 2020.)



CRILS (Centre for Research into reading, Literature and Society) exists to research into the effects on the human psyche of both shared group reading and the private solitary reading of serious literature. This is literature in practice and psychology in action

Interview: DIRK TERRY