Inquiry-based Reading
Towards a conception of reading as a research method
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Inquiry-based reading – Towards a conception of reading as a research method

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Abstract
Reading is an activity in which both researchers and students invest immense time and energy. However, reading is disregarded as a research method and generally assigned a marginal position as a mere supplement to empirical hands-on methods. In this article we argue that reading should be recognized as a method of inquiry. Based on qualitative interviews with 20 researchers from a humanities department, we explore how researchers read, and we show how reading contributes significantly to their knowledge production. We argue that the concepts of ‘close reading’ and ‘surface reading’ in addition to ‘deep approach’ and ‘surface approach’ insufficiently convey how researchers read. Instead we propose the concept ‘Inquiry-Based Reading’ for designating the specific orientation towards texts that characterizes how researchers practise reading to further their research. Finally, we suggest that the conceptualization of inquiry-based reading could open up new discussions about the current position of reading in methods curriculum.

Keywords
Higher education, inquiry-based reading (IBR), reading, research methods, student learning

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Introduction

The university is a site of learning. Although the knowledge produced through research often differs from that produced through studying, learning is at the core of both processes (Bowden and Marton, 2004). In the humanities (and social sciences), processes of learning involve immense investments of time and energy in reading. Methodological explications of how empirical data and documents are read and how they form the basis of knowledge production are vast and widespread. Conversely, the way that academic texts are read and how they form the basis of both student and researcher knowledge production is a largely neglected area of study and research practice. Targeting this area of academic practice, this article explores researchers’ reading practices and how reading furthers knowledge production. We hereby provide a new empirical and conceptual perspective on the significance of reading to researchers’ learning processes that claims space for the practice to be considered at the level of methodology. This, in turn, inspires discussions about the need to develop educational curriculum that can facilitate students’ gaining the likely better learning benefits that we argue elsewhere (Katan and Baarts, submitted for publication) are related to reading when practised as a research methodology.

Reading is generally considered neither a method of inquiry in its own right nor a practice with significant impact on research results. Browsing through the course catalogues from the humanities and social sciences departments of our home university, we identify no courses that include reading among the methods taught. Reading is likewise absent from the contents of significant textbooks on method used in our discipline (Barbour, 2008; Berg, 2007; Denzin and Lincoln, 2008a, 2008b; Hammersley, 2008; Mason, 2006; Richardson, 1990; Riessman, 2008; Silverman, 2004, 2005, 2007; Wolcott, 2001). Finally, when reading through method sections of scientific papers, we observe that descriptions by authors of how they have approached reading appear nonexistent. This suggests that researchers do not consider reading to be a methodological practice significantly influencing the knowledge they produce. Thus, although reading is recognized as a core academic skill (Brookman and Horn, 2016; Culler, 2010; Love, 2010; Maclellan, 1997; Weed, 2012; Weller, 2010), it is by implication constructed as a supplement to genuine research methods. To our knowledge, research undertaken specifically to identify how reading informs and influences knowledge production processes, as well as to develop a conception of reading as a method of inquiry in its own right, is lacking. In this paper we address this concern by exploring what part reading plays in researchers’ knowledge production.

Based on qualitative interviews with researchers in a humanities department at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark, we identify the ways in which the researchers read. We describe how they approach reading and orient themselves during the activity and how reading functions in relation to the production of knowledge. In so doing, we contribute to the field of higher education by developing a concept of reading that is distinct; designating an approach to texts
persistently oriented by a topic of inquiry that both precedes and surpasses reading a given text. We term this ‘Inquiry-Based Reading’ (IBR). Further we argue that IBR is a research method distinct from central conceptions of reading already established in the literature on higher education, such as ‘close reading’ and ‘surface reading’ or ‘deep approach’ and ‘surface approach’. Based on our findings on the significance of reading to researchers’ production of knowledge, we argue that reading in the form of IBR is a method of inquiry. Consequently, we suggest that the conception of IBR brings attention to the relevance of further research aimed at including IBR in educational materials and curriculum.

**Background**

**Research and learning**

Research and studying are both processes of learning in which knowledge is produced (Bowden and Marton, 2004; Brew and Boud, 1995), and both involve personal growth (Reason and Marshall, 1987). The outcomes of studying, however, typically differ from those of research. Ideally, the end of researcher learning processes is knowledge that is new in an absolute sense, and not only for the researcher. This difference has been articulated as learning on the collective level rather than merely on the individual level (Bowden and Marton, 2004: 4). Similarly, this difference in learning outcome and relevance has been conceptualized as a distinction between ‘knowledge construction’ and ‘knowledge building’ (Scardamalia and Bereiter, 2006). The latter refers to developments of or within given domains of research, whereas the former accentuates the personally transformative aspects of learning.

Other studies have depicted how researchers’ personal experiences and accumulated knowledge of research provide underpinnings for the successful acquisition of new knowledge. The somewhat disputed concept of ‘scientific intuition’ (Bowden and Marton, 2004: 78) designates a quasi-sensorous ability to anticipate both the path leading to answers, as well as the answers themselves, and is derived from earlier work and solutions to research problems. Although scientific intuition is discrete from conscious rationalization, prominent researchers have explained how this tacit preapprehension of their research object guides their approach to problem-solving. As such, even before verifying a hypothesis, a researcher may orient towards specific methods and theories with an unaccounted-for certainty that by these means she will be able to attain and argue for specific understandings of the research object (Bowden and Marton, 2004). No studies have hitherto explored the role of scientific intuition in researchers’ reading, possibly because reading has been regarded neither as a research method nor a genuine knowledge-producing practice. Reading may have been disregarded in this respect because it has been associated primarily with individual learning rather than new developments in domains of research.
Reading

Both reading and writing are, nevertheless, practices central to the humanities and the social sciences. Whilst there is some recognition that writing is a skill students need to be taught (Scholes, 2002), and efforts have been made to recognize writing as a method of inquiry (Richardson and St Pierre, 2005), reading has not been subject to similar consideration. Regarding teaching, reading is largely considered as a ‘naturally occurring’ skill rather than a methodological practice to be acquired (Culler, 2010: 22). Students, however, are not ready-made readers, and we cannot take for granted their academic reading skills (Culler, 2010). When reading is considered a skill to be taught and learned, it is typically in the context of early education, where pupils learn to make sense of letters as words. Otherwise, reading is thought to develop organically (Douglas et al., 2016) as students become more experienced.

Within the field of higher education, studies on student approaches to reading assert that these are often instrumental and framed as information-seeking practices aimed at comprehension (Douglas et al., 2016; Stokes and Martin, 2008; Tomasek, 2009; Weller, 2010: 89). Furthermore, reading practices are associated with a generic study skills agenda (Weller, 2010: 89) that is said to be ineffective, misleading and counterproductive to learning (Wingate, 2006). More studies (Maclellan, 1997; Stokes and Martin, 2008; Weller, 2010) support that students’ reading often does not take them beyond ‘adoption’ of perspectives and concepts in the text or the ability to recall and reproduce conceptual meanings or explications.

In contrast, we know from interviews with researchers that their inquiry-based orientation enables their reading to further both their research and their personal development as researchers. We have, however, been unable to identify a conception of this kind of IBR practice within this scholarly literature. In literary studies, though, considerable attention is directed towards reading. The literature covers numerous conceptions of different reading approaches. The most commonly discussed concepts are ‘close reading’ (Brookman and Horn, 2016; Culler, 2010; Douglas et al., 2016; Hayles, 2010; Love, 2010; Poletti et al., 2016; Weller, 2010), ‘active reading’ (Douglas et al., 2016), ‘reflective reading’ (Weller, 2010), ‘reparative reading’ (Sedgwick, 2003), ‘symptomatic reading’ (Best and Marcus, 2009; Hayles, 2010; Weed, 2012), ‘surface reading’ (Best and Marcus, 2009), ‘instrumental reading’ (Douglas et al., 2016; Weller, 2010), ‘distant reading’ (Love, 2010) and ‘flat reading’ (Love, 2010). In particular, close reading and surface reading are discussed extensively.

Close reading encompasses practices such as reflective, active, reparative and symptomatic reading (Love, 2010) and is acknowledged as a core academic skill (Culler, 2010; Douglas et al., 2016). Although the literature on close reading is vast, a shared understanding of how to define it is lacking. As Culler observes, close reading is a ‘contemporary term for a heterogeneous and largely unorganized set of practices and assumptions’ (2010: 20). Scholars agree, however, that close
reading is linked to literary criticism or critical thinking (Culler, 2010; Douglas et al., 2016; Weller, 2010) and involves detailed and sustained interpretation (Douglas et al., 2016) with a focus on the relationship between form and meaning (Douglas et al., 2016; Weller, 2010).

Contrary to close reading, the aim of surface reading is to describe texts accurately (Best and Marcus, 2009: 16). The surface reader accepts the text as is and does not search for hidden meanings. Surface reading establishes a distant relationship between reader and text, instrumentalizing reading to the extent that the approach denies the richness of the particular text in favour of knowledge production on an enlarged scale (Love, 2010: 374). Some of the techniques used to practise cursory reading are known as skimming and scanning (Guillory, 2008: 13); both are practices characterized by a certain speed (fast) and may instigate closer readings. Recent debates, however, suggest that surface reading become acknowledged as a kind of close reading that does not presume depth but offers nonetheless a critical perspective on textual analysis (Best and Marcus, 2009; Love, 2010). In the forthcoming analysis, we will apply the concepts of close reading and surface reading to investigate how they relate to the ways researchers read. This will form the basis of a discussion on whether the concepts of reading established in the literature encompass the ways we find that researchers of this study practise reading.

Reading and learning

In the literature of higher education, reading is closely linked to discussions of student approaches to learning. ‘Deep approach’ and ‘surface approach’ are concepts derived from Marton and Säljör’s (1976) phenomenographic study of student approaches to learning through reading. The concepts have subsequently been elaborated by other education scholars and are still widely in use (e.g., Biggs, 1987; Biggs and Tang, 2007; Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983; Prosser and Trigwell, 1998). Surface approach denotes attempts to learn material by rote. The student is motivated by external requirements and assessment, and her work is focused on collecting disconnected facts and committing these to memory (Ramsden, 1999). The surface reader’s interaction with the material hence is mainly described in terms of reproduction, which makes surface approach comparable in these respects to surface reading.

The student who in contrast employs a deep approach engages in an active process of making sense of new material on a conceptual level. She is intrinsically motivated to acquire knowledge and perspectives, seeking to understand meaning and implications. Deep approach involves acts of relating new knowledge to prior knowledge, as well as to lived surroundings. This is similar to characteristics of close reading. In studies inspired by Marton and Säljör’s original study, conceptual changes have been emphasized as effects of deep approach (Bowden, 1990; Meyer and Land, 2006; Ramsden, 1992). Consequently, deep approach, in contrast to surface approach, has been connected to theories and methods of transformative
learning. In the discussion, we will examine the descriptive capacity of these concepts in order to explore the potential need to develop an independent conceptualization of researchers’ reading.

Method

This study is based on qualitative interviews with 20 researchers employed in a department at the Faculty of Humanities, University of Copenhagen, Denmark. The specific department was chosen because the disciplines housed therein represent the widest spread in research approaches across the faculty of humanities. We achieved an almost even distribution of interviewees according to gender and professional level, recruiting professors, associate professors and assistant professors. PhD students, postdocs and external lecturers were excluded from the sample to ensure that all participants had solid research experience. Interviews took place in the offices of the researchers over two months in spring, 2015 and lasted 75 to 90 minutes. They were semi-structured, investigating how the individual experiences reading, writing and thinking during research and the significance ascribed to these aspects of practice, as well as the perceived interplay among them. Interviewees were prompted about the themes and scope of the interview as they were invited to participate and again before beginning the interview, emphasizing that we were only interested in the reading they do in relation to their research and not their teaching.

The central themes of the interview guide were aimed at procuring rich material for understanding such topics as the following: Does the researcher practise different kinds of reading; what characterizes these; what occasions them; what kinds of knowledge/learning do they yield? Moreover, do different forms of reading involve different forms of writing and note taking; how are these forms characterized, what are their relationships to reading and other forms of writing; and how might thinking be expressed through all the former? We furthermore sought to understand what part reading plays in relation to creating a final product in writing and vice versa, that is, how the demands and constraints of the final format influence what, how and when reading is conducted. Besides these issues we were interested in how the process of research itself is occasioned and motivated – what, for instance, gives rise to an idea and how does the research begin to take shape?

All interviews were conducted in Danish (quotes have been translated for the sake of this article) by the first author. They were recorded digitally and transcribed verbatim on the basis of a transcription guideline. We used Nvivo software to manage data. The transcriptions were coded into broad categories deriving from themes in the interview guide, such as ‘reading’ and ‘writing’. Simultaneously, we identified sub-themes within these categories, such as ‘cursory reading’ and ‘inception of an idea’, without determining any fixed coding themes beforehand within the broad categories. According to Berg (2007: 251), the main aim of open coding is to ‘open inquiry widely’ to identify themes that are important to further analysis. Thus interview segments within the broad categories from the interview guide were
coded with descriptive words, including ‘in vivo’ terms. In a second step, all quotations within each coding were bundled together thematically and collected in a matrix. This enabled us to generate more thematic areas, such as ‘inquiry-based reading’.

Our empirical material indicates that reading and writing are closely connected practices. The researchers shift back and forth between the two; one often occasions the other; and their functions are overlapping. Still, in this paper we choose to focus only on the reading practices of the researchers. The depiction we offer of how researchers read therefore neither describes how writing influences reading nor how reading affects what they write. We also do not depict how the researchers correlate different modes and functions of reading to specific points or phases in the process of writing up research. The analysis is focused on investigating the modes and functions of reading in relation to researchers’ practice, as well as opening up possible understandings of reading as a method of inquiry.

Analysis

The idea for new research plays a crucial role in the researchers’ ways of orienting both towards and during reading. It is necessary, then, to understand what an idea is and how it is configured in order to comprehend the basis for how the researchers approach reading. Although many stated explicitly that reading ‘is where it all [research] begins’, it became evident during interviews that this was not so. Instead, ideas mark the beginning of research. Our researchers named a range of events (a conference call, a political debate, the appearance of a curious empirical phenomenon) as stimulating the inception of new ideas. As such, ideas may be spring from very different occurrences; nevertheless, common to the examples that our researchers presented is how they convey ideas as products of a dynamic between the appearance of something new and yet uncharted and the entire reservoir of conceptual and methodological knowledge belonging to the researcher. As such, although ideas mark a new starting point, they germinate from deep within the researcher’s accumulated academic experience. That researchers draw significantly on their prior work and knowledge when conceiving a new project is reflected in the configuration of ideas: Most research ideas refer not solely to an object or problem that the researcher then later ponders how to approach theoretically and methodologically. In fact, both the problem and the means of approaching and potentially explaining it are often conceived simultaneously. Hence, ideas explained as comprising a more or less elaborated outline of the research process, and sometimes even its knowledge product, demonstrate remarkable similarities to the concept of ‘scientific intuition’ (Bowden and Marton, 2004: 78). The researcher harbours an image of the methods and theoretical perspectives that might enable the laying out of the problem in question, along with the understandings or arguments these methods and perspectives would engender. This image guides her first steps in the research process.
It is important to stress that the researchers are acutely aware that this outline of the research process and its potential results is indeed an outline and hence prone to adjustments and revisions. As a matter of fact, research as an inquiring drive towards understanding given phenomena is in many instances articulated as a process of adjusting and revising one’s preliminary idea. As a researcher puts it:

‘I get an idea […] of how I might analyze something against the backdrop of the knowledge I have of the subject, um, and then I explore it in order to see if it’s tenable. But not only if it’s tenable, because it is a vague hypothesis, you know … but also to flesh out the details in order to … get smarter myself.’

Thus, experiencing research as an explorative process of getting smarter – or to phrase this differently, of learning – finds expression in integrated efforts of adjusting, advancing and substantiating both one’s preliminary understanding of the problem and one’s initial ideas about how to approach it. As we show in the following sections, these revisions are pursued through reading.

This treatment of research ideas demonstrates two central points with absolute relevance to an understanding of how researchers read. First, the researchers do not turn to reading in the hopes that engaging with the thinking inherent in a text will inspire new ideas for research. Rather, the process is the other way around, which relates directly to the second point: It is ideas that encourage the researcher to turn to given texts and that guide her attention while she reads. As shown, ideas involve preconceptions about the theoretical perspectives and concepts that might enable a detailed explanation of a problem. Thus the researchers are already oriented towards certain readings and specific contents within each text as they engage in reading.

Primary modes of reading

In overall terms, the researchers describe two modes of reading, which we term cursory reading and reading in-depth. These modes are distinguishable with respect to the researcher’s motivation to read, the way she engages with the information or thinking inherent in the text and the outcome she ascribes to her reading. Further, in describing their approaches, many researchers apply provisory labels to refer to variances that overlap. Our terms for the two primary modes are adoptions of these provisory labels. When researchers described cursory reading and reading in-depth, the former mode in particular was often expressed implicitly as a contrast to the latter.

Cursory reading. Cursory reading is comparable to reading techniques commonly known as ‘skimming’ and ‘scanning’ (Guillory, 2008). Echoing Guillory’s identification of scanning as a distinct technique (Guillory, 2008: 13), the researchers describe an approach to texts wherein their eyes dart over the pages to detect, somewhat superficially, themes in the text and what information it contains.
Scanning appears to take place in an interim zone between a visual search and reading to detect certain contents. When scanning is decelerated, it becomes skimming, which in less ambiguous terms implies a reading-based examination of the text’s substance (Guillory, 2008). Skimming is similar to Best and Marcus’ (2009) notion of ‘surface reading’, referencing a primarily descriptive orientation towards what is ‘evident, perceptible and apprehensible in texts’ (Best and Marcus, 2009: 9).

Making implicit contrasts to reading in-depth, the researchers explain that cursory reading entails a rather perfunctory involvement with the text: ‘it’s 100 times easier to read. As work it’s 10 times easier to work with. That is, it doesn’t demand very much from me. Because it doesn’t require me to think in a new way’. Cursory reading is not, in the first place, a matter of developing one’s own thinking as much as a matter of acquainting oneself with the thinking of others. When the researchers engage with a text on a cursory level, the effect of reading is not so much a furthering of their own work as a means of facilitating acquaintance with the work of other researchers:

‘It’s primarily about knowing that professor X said this, professor Y said that and professor Z said this and now I want to position myself in relation to these three and then I’ve moved a comma […] it’s a caricature, of course […] but I haven’t become wiser nor have I gained a better understanding of reality […] I may have found out that professor X, Y and Z might have misunderstood something in Plato, but this has neither given me a deeper understanding of Plato nor … of the life I lead’.

Analogous to Best and Marcus’ (2009) depiction of the surface reader’s appraisal of the text, cursory reading entails an approach to what is read that, ‘in the geometrical sense, has length and breath, but no thickness and therefore covers no depth’ (Best and Marcus, 2009: 9). Part of the researchers’ motivation for cursory reading and its outcome relates, then, to achieving an overview and understanding of research in fields connected to their own. In keeping with the literature on surface reading (Best and Marcus, 2009; Guillory, 2008; Hayles, 2010), the researchers in this study tacitly undermine both the perfunctory engagement and learning effects of cursory reading. Meanwhile the researchers reveal in their depictions that they are involved in something more than what is understood by the common conceptualizations of surface reading, skimming and scanning. As a researcher expresses,

‘It becomes something like trying to discern: Okay, can I deduce a structure from this? Can I find an order, so I can map this very complex […] can we find some way to operationalize some periods from this, so that it’s possible to work with, because that’s what I need it for.’

We see that besides allowing researchers to deduce and record how different positions in a field relate, cursory reading involves an aspect of critical appraisal of how meaning or logic is construed. As such, cursory reading is not consistently
distinguishable from notions such as ‘deep approach’ or ‘close reading’ that are commonly contrasted with the concepts of surface reading, skimming and scanning to which we have already compared cursory reading.

When the interviews reflect a tendency to denigrate cursory reading, this cannot be explained in terms of this mode being a purely superficial, uncritical or disengaged approach to text. Instead we need to look at the association the researchers make between achieving an overview of their field, which is a principal outcome of cursory reading, and external requirements for how they present their research as opposed to how they do their research. That is, the knowledge obtained about related research, central controversies, methods and theoretical concepts in relevant fields is used to produce the positioning obligatory to most formats in which researchers publish. As such, cursory reading is in many cases not perceived as a practice relating to the internal processes of research that often find expression as learning. Hence, although cursory reading involves aspects of critical investigation typically associated with deep approach, researchers consider the outcome to be mere factual information rather than learning. In this respect, it does not advance their understanding of the research topic. The researchers’ devaluation of cursory reading is therefore not related to levels of criticality or how thoroughly they understand what they read, but rather whether reading helps them learn more about their topic. Nevertheless, even if cursory reading is to a large extent undervalued for not facilitating learning processes thought of as genuine research, the mode is simultaneously presented as a means of arriving at readings that advance those same processes. Thus, the skimming and scanning implied in cursory reading are portrayed, too, as ways of searching for somewhere to ‘dig deep’ (researcher).

While some employ metaphors such as searching for somewhere to dig deep, others talk about looking for ‘something interesting’. Despite different phrasings, the researchers describe the same thing, namely an orientation towards passages of text that they will want to engage with more thoroughly, that is, to read in more depth. The conception of ‘interesting’ passages, a researcher explains, ‘is a matter of twisting an understanding in a new way […] a sense that something triggers . . .’ As emphasized earlier, a central part of the researchers’ conception of research is the process of advancing, adjusting and substantiating initial understandings of a problem, including their provisional outline for how they imagine the research unfolding. According to a researcher quoted in a previous section, this process of alternately challenging and supporting preliminary ideas is what makes her smarter – in other words, by this process she learns about her subject matter. Hence, as researchers talk about orienting towards passages that will refract their understandings differently, they describe a search for contents that they can learn from; however, the emphasis is not on the thinking inherent to the text, but rather on how their preliminary understanding of the research object might be re-thought in light of what they have read. When the researchers perceive a passage’s content to be interesting, it therefore refers to the anticipation of learning about their topic of research, not the text itself. It is thus an expectation that the contents might help further their understanding of the research topic.
that motivates them to abandon the cursory mode of reading and begin reading in-depth.

**In-depth reading.** In-depth reading was said to require a greater effort than cursory reading. Instead of merely taking note of information, decoding and keeping a record of what they read in its original form, researchers practising in-depth reading are actively engaged in a critical and creative dialogue that extrapolates meaning beyond the intent of the text. That is to say, comprehending the intent and perspective of the text is not the primary objective. Rather, comprehension of contents is conveyed as a basic precondition for exploring how the contents might be used to expand the researchers’ understanding of their personal topic. When engaging in in-depth reading, our researchers hope that the perspectives provided by the text will yield the potential for further explorations and more nuanced understandings of their research topic.

‘When reading academic literature, my starting point is always that I attempt an open approach. But I’m also in dialogue with it. I enter discussions in a different way. Um. And I always relate it to something, and twist and turn it and ... and sometimes I also just experience it, because then I’m completely on board and find it fantastic and then I feel like the text opens up and becomes ... a universe that I can step into and say: Yes! You just made me look at my subject this way!’

Reading in-depth covers a range of different ways that researchers approach and employ in their research those contents they encounter while reading. Part of researchers’ in-depth reading involves practices similar to close reading, that is, sustained interpretation (Adlington and Wright, 2012: 2) and a thorough analysis of the text grounded in critical thinking (Murphin and Ray, 2009 in Douglas et al., 2016). Nevertheless, a central characteristic of in-depth reading is that the researchers are less focused on the objectives of the text than on their own research-related interests. As opposed to focusing on the distinctiveness of individual works, along with their original context and meaning – which characterizes close reading (Culler, 2010: 23) – in-depth reading aspires to integrate selected components into the context of the researcher’s own inquiries. In-depth reading implies a creative investigation of how particular perspectives from a text might be decoupled from their original context and used to explore possible new understandings of the researchers’ subject matter. As the researcher states in the quote above, the universe of the text is not so much interesting in its own right as is the extent to which it expands her understanding of her research. Thus, the text becomes a backdrop against which the contours of her own subject matter are seen anew. In other words, when she learns from reading the text in-depth, she may be learning about something that is not even in the text itself but potentially entirely external to it. Best and Marcus describe the surface as that which is immediately comprehensible in a literal reading of texts in which the reader adheres closely to the author’s intended meaning (2009: 9), and which insists on being
looked at. They argue that we must train ourselves to be able to look through texts (Best and Marcus, 2009: 9). In this respect, the close reader looks below the surface appearance of the text while the text remains the object in focus. On the other hand, when researchers ‘look through’ a text, they look not below the surface but are literally looking through the text, holding up its perspectives like a lens through which they examine anew the appearance of their own research object. This orientation towards exploring whether and how components of a text might enable them to grasp more nuances or adjust previous understandings of their subject matter persistently defines the researchers’ approach to texts:

‘I continually re-examine my own view by means of the things I read. I attempt both to develop it and to refine my own thinking about it, but also to challenge my thinking by confronting it with another text.’

For researchers, re-examining and advancing the thinking on their subject matter forms a significant part of their practice in general, and to expose their own thinking to that in texts by other scholars is an important way of doing it. As mentioned earlier, ‘research’ was frequently expressed as a process of learning. Another way it often is articulated, for example, in the above quotation, is in terms of ‘thinking’. When the researchers describe how their thinking is refined by encountering the thinking inherent in the material they read, they are consequently describing a practice that they conceive of as a very act of research. In other words, reading in-depth is depicted as significantly contributing to what Scardamalia and Bereiter (2006) term ‘knowledge building’.

Hence, if we bear in mind that reading in-depth is conceived of as a genuine act of research, whereas cursory reading is repeatedly contrasted with reading in-depth, then we can build on our earlier understanding of why researchers denigrate cursory reading. We grasp that reading in-depth is perceived as a valued way of doing and furthering research, whereas cursory reading is intermittently conveyed merely as a means to arrive at the former or as a manner of preparing research results for publication.

Effects of reading in-depth on the researcher

In this last section of the analysis, we shift our focus from how reading in-depth affects research or knowledge building to how it affects the researcher as a person who undertakes research. This means that we accentuate how the researcher’s expanded understanding of her subject, resulting from her in-depth engagement with the thinking in the text, reflects moreover a qualitative change in her perceptual horizon. Reading brings the researcher to a different way of thinking, making her capable of perceiving things differently. Reading in-depth, one researcher explains, ‘is reading that aims both to capture knowledge and kind of to internalize it [...]. it’s about managing to appropriate it as something you can also think with.’
The learning that researchers achieve through reading in-depth not only entails becoming more knowledgeable about related research and developing their thinking on their subject, but also involves the researchers’ developing themselves as thinkers. In-depth reading in this sense becomes a personally transformative activity and a means of ‘knowledge construction’ as termed by Scardamalia and Bereiter (2006). That is, it endows the researcher with an enhanced ability to conceive, conceptualize and express the nuances of her subject matter. In the way the researcher quoted above described capturing and appropriating contents from a text as aids to thought, we might say that the text ceases to be a receptacle for concepts or perspectives with a fixed meaning presented rigidly before the researcher’s eyes. Concepts and perspectives more accurately transpose themselves into the outlook of the researcher and make her view and think about her research differently than before. In this sense, the meaning of a text’s contents becomes dynamic, with reading achieving a performative quality – that is, altering the reader as a thinker and a researcher. A researcher states: ‘It’s something the text does to me, but, you know, it’s not something the text does to me without me having invited it to do so.’ Hence, reading in-depth is depicted as an interaction with texts through which the researchers aspire to develop both their research and themselves as researchers.

Discussion: Inquiry-based reading

Reading is central to the way the researchers further their thinking and develop understandings of their research topic. Although the researchers exhibit a tendency to denigrate cursory reading, we consider it equally significant to research practice in that it is a means of arriving at passages where in-depth engagement is relevant. In the following discussion of the findings from the analysis, we will argue that a specific concept of IBR can be construed on the basis of how both cursory and in-depth reading are oriented. Both these modes of reading are expressions of IBR and what is characteristic, we find, is that they are consistently oriented towards furthering understanding of the research topic. Consequently, a conceptualization of reading as laid out in the analysis is not constructed on the basis of being more or less superficial, critical or thorough; rather, on the basis of being oriented in this very specific way, whereby reading becomes a means of producing knowledge about an object external to the text itself. The orientation characteristic of IBR fundamentally entails that the criteria of relevance orienting the researcher’s focus are not defined by what is central to the text’s objective, but rather by what can be used to attain the researcher’s own objective. As these criteria orient the researcher’s attention in both cursory and in-depth reading, we identify both modes as manifestations of IBR.

Given the part that IBR plays as a means for researchers to explore and advance understandings of their topic, we suggest that it ought to be recognized as a genuine research practice. Yet as stated earlier, the omission of reading from both journal articles and textbooks on method implicitly ascribes to reading a lack of
status as a tool for research. Contrary to this position, our analysis shows that reading is not just a supplement to empirical and analytical methods, but when undertaken as IBR, represents a mode of knowledge production in its own right.

The reading concepts established and available in the literature on higher education share the text itself as the primary object that the reader is focused on understanding. As such, these concepts do not capture the distinctiveness of IBR as an orientation towards texts that is guided by a topic or question of inquiry formulated prior to and independently of reading the individual text. Reading might improve the question’s formulation, and even aspires to do so, but the object of inquiry remains and endures beyond the margins of each text read. That comprehending the text is never the primary object for the IBR reader marks a fundamental departure from both Marton’s and Saljö’s concepts of reading, as well as from close and surface reading. Deep approach does involve a central aspect of relating contents from current reading to previously learned material or ‘real’ phenomena, but the text itself persists as the object in focus. Likewise, the sustained interpretation of close reading positions the text at the centre of the reader’s critical inquiry. For the IBR reader, however, the modes of analytical sense-making entailed by close reading and deep approach are not the central activity but rather partial steps towards discerning if and how a text might be used to develop answers to the question of inquiry. Consequently, the concept of relevance that guides the attention and efforts of IBR readers does not mirror what is most central to the intents and interests of the text, but rather to the readers’ inquiry. As such, those points most relevant to the content of the text are not necessarily the focus for IBR readers; the focus instead is those points enabling readers to talk about their own object of inquiry.

Thus for IBR readers, the purpose of reading different texts and recognizing their distinct contents is to be found in adhering to a single objective as the reference point for relevance, namely, moving forward their inquiry. Accordingly, the various texts become stepping stones in a continuous journey towards more complex understandings of the object of inquiry. This is a noteworthy difference from approaches where the reader enters into each text as a receptacle for points and perspectives to be discerned in a series of separate acts of learning, which are not necessarily excluded by close reading or deep approach. In IBR, however, the researcher orients towards reading on the basis of an inquiry wherein the experiencing of each text aspires to further and elaborate understanding of an independently formulated question. We suggest we are looking, then, at a distinct approach facilitating different learning outcomes from the established concepts in the literature of higher education.

Hitherto, surface and deep approaches have had a near-to-dominant position in regard to both research on student reading and teaching of study skills. However, they do not capture the specific characteristics of the inquiry-based orientation described in this study – in fact, they may be overshadowing or distracting practitioners and scholars of education from recognizing the distinctness of IBR. The inquiry-based orientation employed by researchers in this study characterizes
both their cursory and their in-depth reading. Given the well-established position of deep and surface approaches, there is a risk that the two empirical categories of reading derived from this study are misinterpreted as paralleling surface and deep approaches. This would, however, be faulty. Although reading in-depth does not involve the practices of skimming and scanning common to cursory reading and surface approach, the parallel is distorted in that both cursory and in-depth reading entail aspects of critical analysis that typically are ascribed only to deep approach. As already mentioned, the empirical categories of cursory and in-depth reading are expressions of a specific way of orienting towards reading; and this, rather than levels of engagement, is what makes them distinct. As such, it would not be accurate to conceptualize the specific orientation towards reading found in this study as a third approach on the same plane as deep and surface approaches. Hence, instead of suggesting a triplet concept adding to Marton and Säljö’s original twin concepts, we have proposed the independent concept ‘Inquiry-Based Reading’.

Considering the part that IBR plays in the researchers’ work provides the grounds for acknowledging reading as a valid research practice. This study introduces IBR as a genuine knowledge-producing practice rather than merely a way to learn about knowledge already produced. As IBR is not a supplementary activity but represents an actual way of exploring and inquiring into a topic of research, the concept renegotiates the current position of reading in relation to more broadly recognized methodological practices. Consequently, questions are opened up regarding the extent to which researchers should reflect on and account for their course of reading and how it might influence their final findings. Recognizing IBR as a scientifically germane practice moreover gives rise to a discussion about the relevance of integrating it into the higher education curriculum; that is, whether and how students ought to be taught reading as a method of inquiry and whether IBR should be introduced in textbooks on scientific methods and methodology. Accordingly, we suggest that IBR offers a potential application for expanding the range of activities in which curricula such as Inquiry-Based, Problem-Based, Discovery-Based learning and more are grounded. Accentuating how IBR facilitates not only knowledge building but also knowledge construction, the findings from this researcher study may be applied to the field of student learning in order to explore the capacities of IBR to improve student outcomes from reading and thus provide more meaningful and transformative learning experiences.

Conclusion

In this paper we have shown how reading plays out in researchers’ practice and its role in furthering research. We have argued that on this basis reading should be recognized as a method of inquiry. We have proposed the term ‘Inquiry-Based Reading’ as a conceptualization of the specific orientation towards texts that makes the researchers’ reading (and learning outcomes) distinct from other concepts of reading already established in the literature on higher education.
As a result of the conceptualization of IBR as a method of inquiry, we have suggested that the findings in this paper renegotiate the position of reading in relation to other research practices, where reading has hitherto been largely overlooked. Having been omitted both from method sections in journal articles and from textbooks on method, reading has implicitly been construed as methodologically insignificant. Following on from the conceptualization of IBR and the renegotiation of its positioning as a scientifically relevant practice, we have also suggested that a discussion about the relevance of introducing and teaching IBR to students be opened up.

Nevertheless, as reading has so far been disregarded as a method of inquiry, more research is needed both to produce understandings of IBR as a method of inquiry, as well as to develop teaching materials. This study is small scale relative to the worldwide population of researchers. IBR may differ significantly across institutions and disciplines and other variables. Moreover, additional challenges need to be considered in relation to implementing IBR in the contexts of teaching.

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Charlotte Andreas Baarts is Associate Professor and Head of Studies at the Department of Sociology, University of Copenhagen. Her research interests covers particularly learning, knowledge and expertise. With a background in anthropology her research is based on ethnographic and auto-ethnographic approaches through which she has been engaged in investigating the production of knowledge, learning processes and the practice of expertise among construction workers, alternative practitioners and hospital staff. She has published within the fields of sociology of health and illness, sociology of work and educational sociology.