

Wednesday 6th December

'What's in the picture?'

Listening to children talking about a famous painting.

About 30 u3a members - some of us grandparents, some of us educationists, some of us just interested listeners – and some of us all three – gathered together on the St Luke's site to listen to an extremely stimulating talk by Professor Fiona Maine, Professor of Language and Literacy in Education.

The focus was on 'dialogic learning' – whereby children discuss a painting (The Lady of Shalott by John William Waterhouse 1888) previously unknown to them – exploring ideas together in pairs and suggesting possible meanings. The children – 2 boys and 2 girls – were recorded at the ages of 6, 11 and 16.

Before we 'met' the children, Fiona introduced the theories behind her work, giving clear explanations combined with infectious enthusiasm. How lucky Exeter students are to be taught by her!

She talked to us about how we 'read' visual texts and made 5 points:

- We still have to 'decode'
- We need to make connections to what we already know
- We need to synthesise information
- We need to make inferences

And last but not least – we need to ask questions.

It was fascinating – and at times very amusing - to hear the children talking together at each of these stages – and to see the differences and similarities in the ideas they each had about the painting.

Using the 4 points below, Fiona explained to us about Dialogic Readers:

- Critical and creative: questioning, enquiring and challenging
- Responsive: flexible and able to build on the ideas of others
- Collaborative: able to manage a discussion to best effect and negotiate meanings
- Reflective: aware of their own thinking and task progress within a context

At one point Fiona asked the question – what is the point of primary education? To teach the children the 'right' answers, to show them how to pass exams, to encourage the sharing of ideas?????

Mmmmmmmmm – plenty of food for thought! As always, lots of great questions and discussion at the end.

Carol McCullough

Maine, F. (2015) Dialogic Readers: Children talking together about visual texts. London: Routledge