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Article

Title: A novel idea... reading groups as community outreach

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Title: A novel idea

Subtitle: reading groups as community outreach

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Author Biographies:

Jenny Townend is the Learning Support Specialist for the University of Northampton Library and Learning Services and one of the original facilitators of the Reading Group project.

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Abstract: The article investigates the current research in the field of reading and reading groups and discusses an exciting and innovative on-going project at the University of Northampton. The project involves the establishment of reading groups within the local community to raise literacy levels and aspirations and to nurture a passion for reading.

Article content:

Reading groups are not an original idea; they have been a feature of reader development strategies within public libraries for many years and have become increasingly popular in other settings. Local community groups, work places, school libraries and even university libraries are often involved in the facilitation of groups within their own specific communities. Reading groups encourage reading for pleasure and provide an arena in which participants are able to discuss reading with other people. Research into the area conducted by Jenny Hartley looks at the reading group phenomenon that gained popularity in the late 1990s through surveying a large number of groups and discusses the reason for the possible boom of reading group memberships¹.

Reading itself has many benefits; Clark & Rumbold² identified ten different benefits which impact on society, education, literacy and confidence:

- Reading attainment and writing ability;
- Text comprehension and grammar;
- Breadth of vocabulary;
- Positive reading attitudes;
- Greater self-confidence as a reader;
- Pleasure in reading in later life;
- General knowledge;
- A better understanding of other cultures;
- Community participation; and
- A greater insight into human nature and decision-making.

¹ Hartley, J. (2002) *The reading groups book*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

² Clark, C. & Rumbold, K. (2006) *Reading for pleasure: a research overview*. [Online] London: National Literacy Trust. Available from: http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/assets/0000/0562/Reading_pleasure_2006.pdf. [Accessed: 07/08/12].

There have been many other reports and investigations into the benefits of reading^{3,4,5} the majority of which cover the child and young adult demographic, but in all of these reports it is made clear that children's reading habits and subsequent behaviours are enhanced by reading being encouraged within their family⁶.

With this in mind the Library within the University of Northampton wanted to find a way to help encourage literacy within the local community. In 2006 we collaborated with our Community Volunteers Service with a view to establishing a reading group within a local community group in need of literacy support. Discussing the project with local Public Library leaders ensured that setting up such a group would not be stepping into their territory and we then decided upon three simple objectives for the initiative:

- To improve confidence with literacy
- To encourage participants to consider their educational alternatives or further study
- To improve visibility of the University and to promote our open access libraries.

The objectives were useful in gaining funding for the group from a central University source due to their alignment with the Widening Participation Agenda of the institution. For the project, the University Library provided us as facilitators and the reading material through the aforementioned funding. Participants were able to keep the books after reading which acted as an incentive for attendance and enabled them to expand their own personal libraries.

We opened communication with the local YWCA; a charity working with young women facing poverty, discrimination and abuse, to gauge interest in the project. The "Mums and Tots" group was identified as the most in need of support with literacy and the most open to the idea, also allowing us to encourage the young mothers to read with and to their children.

After initial discussions relating to past reading choices and genre preferences, we shortlisted a catalogue of fifteen books from which the group selected the titles that would be read in the coming months. We opted to meet monthly for discussion of the book and we included extra activities such as quizzes, debates and poetry analysis. After requests from participants we also introduced a period of silent reading to end the session. The attendees really valued the opportunity to express their opinions and a member of YWCA staff commented that "the young women look forward to coming in for the sessions and are often heard discussing the book content. They now make time to read and for some it has created some relaxing 'me time' which is important for young mums."

³ OECD (2010). *PISA 2009 Results: Learning to Learn – Student Engagement, Strategies and Practices (Volume III)*. [Online]. Available from: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264083943-en>. [Accessed: 07/08/12].

⁴ Court, J. (2011) *Read to succeed: strategies to engage children and young people in reading for pleasure*. London: Facet Publishing.

⁵ Clark, C. & De Zoysa, S. (2011) *Mapping the interrelationships of reading enjoyment, attitudes, behaviour and attainment*. [Online]. London: National Literacy Trust. Available from: http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/assets/0001/0025/Attainment_attitudes_behaviour_enjoyment-Final.pdf. [Accessed: 07/08/12].

⁶ Department for Education. (2012) *Encouraging reading for pleasure*. [Online]. Available from: <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/pedagogy/b00192950/encouraging-reading-for-pleasure>. [Accessed 07/08/12], p.2.

The YWCA group ran for five years, with two colleagues taking over facilitation. This allowed us to establish a second group at a local drugs and alcohol counselling centre. Again the University provided the books and staff time for facilitating the project. The group achieved its objectives of encouraging wider reading choices and building confidence amongst participants whilst helping to provide a distraction from complex personal issues and situations. One group member at the centre summed up the sessions, remarking that “they take place in a very friendly, informal, non-competitive environment....They have encouraged me to read more and to consider other types of literature and I enjoy them enormously.”

After two years the counselling centre took over the running of the group enabling a third strand to the project to be set up with a local women’s refuge. This third group has now been running for eighteen months and has a steady attendance with group members being keen to meet to discuss what they’ve been reading, for the group and personally. The group members have observed that their reading material is more varied with one participant stating “I never used to read fiction. It’s broadened my horizons.” And another reflecting that the group has helped to improve her self esteem and she now claims to have “so much more confidence in voicing my opinions”. A member of staff from the refuge commented: “As a support worker it has been great to be able to encourage women to attend the group to meet others without them feeling that the focus will be on the only thing they have in common which is domestic abuse.”

The project, encompassing all three groups, has involved approximately 100 unique attendees of whom several have expressed interest in finding out more about the University and potential funding for further education thereby fulfilling our second objective to encourage consideration of further study. Members of the groups have also been given opportunities to visit the University libraries and were offered free associate memberships allowing them to borrow resources.

The reading group project at Northampton is, we believe, unique. Literature reveals several other universities both in the UK and USA are involved in reading groups^{7,8,9}, but these appear to be limited to groups set up for students or staff within the institution, rather than as part of an outreach or community engagement strategy. The exception to this is the University of Roehampton’s involvement in the Prison’s Reading Group¹⁰ which is run in partnership with the prisoner’s education trust and is facilitated by prison librarians.

The project is one that we as facilitators remain passionate about and are immensely proud of. In 2008 we were given the University’s Staff Volunteering Project award and were

⁷ University of Exeter. (n.d.) *Reading groups – English*. [Online] Exeter: University of Exeter. Available from: <http://humanities.exeter.ac.uk/english/research/readinggroups/>. [Accessed 07/08/12].

⁸ Department of philosophy. (n.d.) *Department seminars and reading groups*. [Online.] Nottingham: University of Nottingham. Available from: <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/philosophy/research/seminars.aspx#reading>. [Accessed: 07/08/12].

⁹ Fajardo, A. (2010) Book clubs: not just for public libraries. *College and undergraduate libraries*. 17(1).

¹⁰ Prison’s Reading Group. (n.d.) *Prison’s Reading Group Home Page*. [Online]. Roehampton: University of Roehampton. Available from: <http://www.roehampton.ac.uk/Prison-Reading-Groups/>. [Accessed: 07/08/12].

nominated for a Higher Education Academy Volunteering award later in the same year. Since then we've been asked to present on the project at several regional events^{11,12, 13} and facilitated workshops¹⁴ and presented posters^{15,16} at three conferences and continue to seek opportunities for dissemination.

¹¹ MacLellan, F. and Townend, J. (2010) Reading groups: Community volunteering to promote reading. Presentation at: LIEM Beyond the reading list – a practical introduction to reader development for academic library staff. Held at: Nottinghamshire Archives, 12th May 2010.

¹² MacLellan, F. and Townend, J. (2009) Reading groups: a university outreach. Presentation at: EMALINK Community engagement: working in partnership with the community workshop. Held at: The University of Northampton, 9th June 2009.

¹³ MacLellan, F. and Townend, J. (2008) Reading groups: a university outreach. Presentation to: Volunteer Reading Help, Centre for Community Volunteering Held at: The University of Northampton, September 2008.

¹⁴ Townend, J. and MacLellan, F. (2010) Reading groups: establishing partnerships as part of a community outreach strategy at the University of Northampton. Workshop presented to: Fifth CILIP CoFHE and UC&R Joint Conference: Futureproof: Making Libraries Indispensable to Learning, Teaching and Research, University of Exeter, 21-23 June 2010.

¹⁵ MacLellan, F. and Townend, J. (2008) Reading groups: a university outreach. Poster presented to: Art Libraries Society (ARLIS) Annual Conference 2008, University of Liverpool, 23 - 25 July 2008.

¹⁶ Townend, J. and MacLellan, F. (2011) Nene Valley Christian Family Refuge and The University of Northampton Reading Group. Poster presented to: Widening Participation Project Dissemination Event, The University of Northampton, 13 September 2011. Also presented to: "Research Active: Library and Learning Services Conference 2012", University of Northampton, 19 June 2012.