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Chatterbooks – creating a culture of reading for pleasure

Liz Chamberlain, Senior Lecturer, The Open University

Here, Liz Chamberlain, from The Open University, shares the outcomes of a collaborative project focused on reading for pleasure through the creation of reading clubs, which involved four UK universities and The Reading Agency. In each university, small groups of student teachers decided to trial the Chatterbooks resources with their classes whilst on school placements. The lecturers expected to hear that the children had responded favourably to the ideas and texts talked about during the sessions, however, it was the impact on the student teachers that was the most striking.

What are Chatterbooks Reading Clubs?

Chatterbooks is the UK's largest network of children's reading groups. The scheme has been coordinated by The Reading Agency since 2011, with groups being run in public libraries and schools across the country. There are 10,000 children who belong to Chatterbooks groups, and the model is suitable for children aged between 4 and 12 years old.

Our Chatterbooks Project

Chatterbooks Reading Clubs are all about promoting reading for pleasure: this was the starting point that encouraged a cohort of student teachers to trial some of the freely available resources with classes whilst on their school placements.

The Reading Club format aims to inspire children to read different kinds of books, develop their confidence in talking in a group situation and to engage in creative follow-up activities. Most importantly, being involved in book talk introduces children and their teachers to a range of texts, and often encouraged them to go beyond their usual repertoire of reading, which research has highlighted as being crucial in encouraging children to read for pleasure (Cremin et al., 2014).

The Chatterbooks project was introduced to 24 students who were specialising in Children's Literature at the University of Greenwich. The students were in their final year of a BA (QTS) degree course and were about to undertake their final teaching practice in a primary school located in the South East of England.

Introduced as a pilot study, the students were given the option to take part and were advised to take into consideration factors such as their own development whilst on teaching practice and the willingness of the school to embrace and support the project. The aims of the project were for the students to identify their own areas of development for subject knowledge, as well as nurturing a confidence around understanding and selecting children's literature. Seven students undertook the project.

Before the project started, a baseline survey determined the students' initial levels of confidence around reading for pleasure; whilst most students felt confident teaching

children's literature, their knowledge of children's literature was 'reasonable'. Favourite authors mentioned included Michael Morpurgo, Roald Dahl and Anne Fine. Their responses mirrored the results of the UKLA Phase I survey 'Teachers as Readers' (Cremin et al., 2009) which asked 1,200 primary teachers to name six 'good' children's writers. The table below shows the top five authors named by both groups:

University of Greenwich responses	Teachers as readers responses
Jaqueline Wilson Roald Dahl Michael Morpurgo Oliver Jeffers Anne Fine	Jacqueline Wilson Roald Dahl Michael Morpurgo J.K Rowling Anne Fine
Percentage able to name 6 authors: 72%	Percentage able to name 6 authors: 46%

(Cremin et al., 2009)

The students selected the weekly themes and resourced the books required. The decision was taken to resource the club based on books already available in the school, rather than borrowing theme boxes from the University. This ensured the students had a good knowledge of the books available in each class library, as well as those found in the school library.

At the end of the project, all seven students reported feeling more confident in teaching children's literature and the percentage of those feeling more confident with regards to their own knowledge of children's literature had increased by a third.

All students shared their discoveries of new authors, poets or illustrators whilst resourcing the club naming Jeff Kinney, Chris Riddell and Dav Pilkey. Running the club, having autonomy over the structure of the club and also the need to source texts from the school all impacted on the students' own knowledge and enjoyment of children's literature.

Here, the lecturers at each of the students' universities share their thoughts on the process.

The breadth of reading (authors and genres) that the students had chosen both encouraged the children to look beyond their normal choices of reading, but also challenged their perception of what counted as 'reading'.

'I thought magazines were boring and for girls.'

For the children who lacked confidence in their reading abilities, the low-stakes environment of the reading clubs appears to have provided a space in which they could discuss what they were reading and explore the stories that emerged from a range of literature, without the fear of judgement.

The positive outcomes for the children were matched by the responses of the student researchers to the project. There is a sense in which the students were given permission to celebrate reading, and to model book talk, in ways that were not confined to specific national curriculum expectations. We can be certain that the experience of leading the Chatterbooks sessions has had an impact on the pedagogies of the students and on their perceptions of what makes good practice in the teaching of reading and the fostering of reading for pleasure.

**Dr Alastair Daniel, Senior Lecturer,
University of Winchester**

In the first Chatterbooks session, the children had the opportunity to visit the school's library, this was something that none of the six children had yet experienced. The children spent fifteen minutes sharing and exploring the plethora of texts within the library. One child, in particular, appeared excited to share a joke book he had discovered; having foraged through the book he then called upon a friend to listen to a joke he desperately wanted to share. Although the child was unable to read the joke, he was able to devise his own.

Throughout the course of the sessions, it became apparent that the children involved were not necessarily 'reluctant to read'; however their perception of what reading entailed was perhaps skewed. Several children within the group associated reading with going into the corridor to read books 1:1 with an adult. However, this was challenged throughout our Chatterbooks sessions. The activities the children were involved in enabled them to see how texts can be brought to life through drama and role-play.

**Chloe Hinxman
Year 1 NQT and Canterbury Christ Church
University Alumni**

At first, the sessions resulted in heated discussions and a sense of disengagement from the texts, possibly due to the lack of confidence some children had about handling unfamiliar books.

However, as the sessions continued and children demonstrated a sense of community and ownership, evidenced by child-led debates, role-play and spontaneous rewriting of stories, this gap began to narrow and eventually close. Authors, such as Giancarlo Gemin and Michael Rosen, had a significant role to play in this and demonstrated to the collective the benefits of exploring different texts and working together.

This increasing engagement was astonishing to witness and led to a ground-breaking moment in the final session. The children chose the picture book 'Rules of Summer' by Shaun Tan to explore and, as usual, naturally organised themselves in preparation for a discussion by creating a circle of communication. During this, participants talked about the pictures, the simple sentences, its representations and they also took this time to reflect on how this related to their own lives and past experiences. Within this, sensitive issues such as bullying, self-esteem and bereavement were discussed and each child within the collective actively listened, respected and empathised with one another. This, for me, was the defining moment, where I was allowed the privilege of observing the powerful effect of children's literature and reader response.

**Kate,
Canterbury Christ Church University**

At Winchester, a group of PGCE students carried out a small, classroom-based, investigation focussed on reading for pleasure, with the expectation that they write an assignment in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the specific classroom intervention. Four of the students opted to engage with the Chatterbooks project and become co-researchers with the tutors. This meant that not only were there Chatterbooks questionnaires to draw upon, but there would also be the opportunity to reflect on the students' written assignments where they had analysed the impact of their teaching and learning activities; in addition, at the end of the project, two of the students were interviewed.

At the start of the project, students found that the children's perceptions of reading varied. For some, confidence in their reading abilities did not correlate with the pleasure that they drew from the act of reading. Other children said that although they enjoyed reading, they didn't feel confident in their own abilities. Following the Chatterbooks sessions, these two aspects of reading were much closer together when the children were questioned about their attitudes.

The approach to the Chatterbooks project taken at CCCU was similar to those adopted at both Winchester and Greenwich. Students from the BA (Hons.) Children's Literature research group were invited to participate as co-researchers in the Chatterbooks project as part of their final year research project. Six students volunteered to participate in the project.

The initial questionnaires that the students completed indicated that they were avid and passionate readers themselves: they knew a wide range of recently published authors and enjoyed reading children's literature. This was evidently an area in which they were confident. However, adopting pedagogical strategies that could ignite children's passion for books was something they found a little daunting. They were proficient at the teaching of phonics but were very unsure as to how this knowledge might encourage the enjoyment of reading. They were given the Chatterbooks materials and, as a group, discussed a range of possibilities as to how the project might look in the classroom context.

At first, the sessions resulted in the children becoming more aware of the variety of texts available; the use of graphic novels particularly engaged them, as well as the use of texts they categorised as 'action and adventure books'. As the sessions continued, the children demonstrated an increasing sense of ownership over the texts they were reading, in particular, 'The Firework Maker's Daughter' by Phillip Pullman (1995), as well as over their Chatterbooks group as a community of readers. They decided to create a stop-motion animation of a scene from the story. This not only enabled them to voice their opinions on how they interpreted the part of the book selected, but also to discuss their feelings about the characters, story line and their interpretations of any 'deeper meaning'. What was most exciting for me, however, was the clear enjoyment of the pupils as they constantly referred to the book to back up their choices for their stop animation scene. This suggested to me, that they had a genuine interest, enjoyment and understanding of the book they had selected.

Josie Surman-Wells, Canterbury Christ Church University

As the projects progressed, it became evident that the students began to develop in confidence and this, in turn, encouraged in them a greater sense of autonomy and the ability to take greater risks in their teaching. A real sense of a community of readers engaged in book talk began to emerge between the students and also between the children, who, in some of the schools, had originally been chosen to participate in the project by the class teacher or head. The Chatterbooks club also encouraged the children to engage in practices, which supported their engagement with books, both through

discussion and through their active involvement in multimedia projects based on books they were enjoying.

What the students themselves experienced served to encourage their understanding of how a wide range of pedagogies can support children's enjoyment of reading and their engagement with books. This has had a positive impact on their knowledge of effective strategies to support children's reading for pleasure whilst also encouraging their reading development and progress.

**Tracy Parvin,
Canterbury Christ Church University**

The Chatterbooks project is now in its third year at the University of Worcester and is an established part of the 'additional', optional opportunities offered to second-year undergraduate BA QTS students. The rationale is to provide an opportunity to work in a school with a small group of children in a non-assessed context. The aim is to both increase the students' knowledge of children's literature, as well as develop approaches to encourage reading for pleasure. The students (around 20) met monthly with Primary English team staff to plan engaging, interactive Chatterbooks sessions. The opportunity to collaboratively plan and share texts and ideas was considered an essential part of the project. We were very fortunate to be supported by Worcestershire's Schools' Library Service which provided us with boxes of carefully chosen, age-appropriate books in line with our chosen 'theme' for the month. We also used The Reading Agency on-line resources for ideas to support the planning of the sessions.

As a trainee involved with the pilot project, the impact on both the pupils I worked with and in my own professional practice has been significant.

Specifically focussing on a group of 10 children in a rural primary school setting, with the skill but not the will to read, our group's thematic sessions were driven by the pupils' interests and ideas, which included spies, pirates and fantastical creatures. In the battle to engage the disengaged, we dressed up as pirates and spies, created and cracked our own codes, set up treasure hunts and regularly cast aside our dignity when performing and reading to and with the children.

We also took great care to involve ourselves in the reading groups as participants as well as facilitators; reading texts from the resource boxes ourselves and explaining why we did, or in some cases, really did not, enjoy them; just as we asked the children to do

On a personal level, the project has also shaped my future academic study: forming the basis for my undergraduate dissertation and now also shaping the direction of my current Master's degree.

(Continued on next page)

Furthermore, the opportunity to share, discuss and genuinely enjoy books with pupils as I did in this project highlighted the pedagogical trap into which I had already fallen; choosing classroom texts based solely on their curriculum links and opportunities, rather than also considering whether children would enjoy them, laugh at them or even identify with them.

In response, my daily teaching practise now includes a class text, unrelated to Literacy, which is chosen and led daily by the children; regular Free Reading time and a Book Nook, which forms the heart of my classroom. Heavily influenced by my reflections on the Chatterbooks project, the Book Nook is packed with a range of texts, as well as those the children have written themselves.

It also features a golden Recommendations shelf, a Not Quite Finished shelf, Post-it note review board and a Reading for Pleasure chat forum board for children to share their ideas, discuss their opinions and become really involved in the diverse and exciting nature of reading; which they really have.

Gemma Bagnall, NQT and University of Worcester

By the end of the project, all of the students reported an increase in their knowledge of children's literature and confidence in teaching with literature. They particularly valued sharing ideas and teaching approaches with their peers in a non-assessed context and the opportunity to work with children of different ages from their chosen training pathway.

**Joy Stanton,
University of Worcester**

For these teaching students, and their lecturers, they have completed their training ready to promote reading for pleasure in their classrooms. They have the confidence to create a culture reading culture where quality children's literature is at the heart of their practice, where children will enjoy being read to and, most importantly, they will be teachers who create communities of reading where their pupils will be encouraged to find that one book that will turn them into lifelong readers.

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Cremin, T, Mottram, M, Collins, F, Powell, S and Safford, K (2014) *Building Communities of Engaged Readers: Reading for pleasure*, London, Routledge.

Suggested reading:

Gemin, G. (2014) *Cow Girl*, Nosy Crow, London. **ISBN:** 0857632817

Kinney, J. (2014) *The Third Wheel: Diary of Wimpy Kid 7*, London, Puffin. **ISBN:** 0141345748

Pilkey, D. (2013) *The Adventures of Captain Underpants*, Oxford, Scholastic. **ISBN:** 0439014573

Pullman, P. (2004) *The Firework Maker's Daughter*, New York, US, Yearling. **ISBN:** 0440866405

Riddell, C. (2015) *Ottoline and the Yellow Cat*, London, Macmillan Children's Books. **ISBN:** 033045028X

Tan, S. (2013) *Rules of Summer*, Hodder, London, **ISBN:** 0734410670.

It is free to join the Chatterbooks network.

Sign up at www.chatterbooks.org.uk to find out more about running children's book clubs and to try out some of the free, themed Chatterbooks packs, which include activities, book recommendations and discussion ideas. If you are interested in setting up a Chatterbooks group as a student teacher or as an Initial Teacher Training provider please contact:

lynne.taylor@readingagency.org.uk