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Reading communities and books in common

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Reading communities: why, what and how?

Are you seeking to build a vibrant community of readers within and beyond your classroom? If so, how will you know when you've achieved your goal? What are the key characteristics of such communities- can these be seen, heard, felt, experienced? What strategies and practices will help you succeed? Is there a fail-safe route? A motorway between research and practice?

With reading for pleasure (RfP) now mandated it is worth exploring these questions, in part as this should help us reflect on reading itself and our goals and intentions. Will the expected standard suffice or are you stretching for greater depth? Are you seeking to create lifelong readers who can and do choose to read for their own pleasures and multiple purposes in their lives, and . In exploring this issue Indeed, why do so many of us spend precious time and effort seeking to develop reading communities?

For the feel-good factor? The human connection? For that and/or experienced membership alongside the young? Are you a member of any reading communities beyond the classroom? In a book group or on Twitter perhaps? perhaps? Or participate in the community of avid teacher-readers on Twitter? And do you see yourself as a member of your classroom reading community? Is there one?

Personally, I've been a member of the same book group for over 20 years and even though we moved away a decade ago, I still drive back each month. Our debates are often very vehement- some loved, some loathed *A Little Life* by Hanya Yanagihara for instance (it is harrowing), but after the deliberation we live with our differences and move on. We spend time relating the text to our lives and sharing triggered anecdotes, and we discuss the author's intent, their character construction, language, style and the cultural and historical context of the text. Our personal and emotional responses though receive *much* more air time. We also connect the book to others we've read, invoking our history and 'books in common' as a group, and we drink a lot of wine! As adults and as readers we know each other well – a strong sense of connection and community exists. Possibly some of this chimes with your book group?

In our research into reading communities in schools, both in *Teachers as Readers* and *Extracurricular Reading Groups*, (who were shadowing the Carnegie / Kate Greenaway Awards), we found that when the adults opened up as readers and shared their personal affective (not primarily pedagogic) responses, this helped them develop more authentic reader to reader relationships with younger readers.

In *Teachers as Readers*, (TaRs) when practitioners enriched their repertoires of children's literature, they found it easier to join in children's casual conversations about texts and were more able to skilfully book match and recommend books to individuals. Many also became more open and interested in receiving text recommendations from their students and the resultant, often relatively brief conversations, about the 'books in common' that they had swapped, prompted the sharing of life to text and text to life connections – human to human - not teacher to pupil. Over time, teachers noticed children exchanging more texts too and recognised the value of these emerging reader to reader networks.

Reading communities take time to build. They are relationship strong and

highly interactive, and shift reading from an individual private pursuit to a more collaborative social activity. (Cremin et al., 2014)

In the *Extracurricular Reading Groups* we observed the strong relationships which the predominantly secondary school librarian leaders had with students in their groups. The Carnegie shortlist created a set of 'books in common' which became the focus of deep discussion. These groups also made myriad personal responses and used the opportunity to debate wider questions about families, society and the world. This discussion was rarely initiated by the adults present and almost never led by them; the young people tended to raise their own questions, debate and argue about the words and the world and through this their views, values and feelings came to the fore.

This was in marked contrast to the English classrooms from which many of the group members came, the reading sessions there were framed by teachers' questions about the class set text. The young people expressed strong views about the differences: they repeatedly told us that in the English classroom due to assessment 'there is no choice', you need to 'hold back', and have to 'watch what you say' or 'you'll be marked down'. This surely constrains not only comprehension, but their capacity to make connections, both with the text and with other readers.

In the extracurricular sessions students felt they could voice their views and 'say what we really think'. In this context relationships could be, and often were, rather different. School librarians positioned themselves as co-readers and many of the teachers who attended came as readers too. Students noticed that some were 'less teacher-like' in the group, and commented that teachers were 'more relaxed here', 'she reads the books too' and 'she like- treats us like a friend – like someone we can talk to'. This meant that the young people felt they were freer to voice their divergent opinions and could take the time to explore their own issues and affective responses in this trusted community of readers.

It isn't easy in the classroom to make the time to talk informally about texts, to engage in two way recommendations as the TaRs teachers did and then to respond to a child about the 'book in common' you've both chosen to read. But if we want to build communities of readers then it's essential we position ourselves as fellow readers and seize informal opportunities to engage in such significant book blether. Initially the young may assume we're going to ask endless questions to check their understanding of a character or specific vocabulary, but if we're authentically engaged as readers, they'll soon come to realise that we're genuinely interested in their personal thoughts, feelings and views. We can offer our own opinions too and seek to help our students recognise that conflicting views and diverse opinions are normal, healthy, interesting and inevitable. Reading communities are characterised by reciprocity, interaction and difference, not by conformity.

We can also seek to capitalise upon the potential of 'books in common' through informal, non-assessed discussions emerging from book swaps, book groups or reading aloud for instance. Some texts, as in adult book groups, are more affectively engaging and memorable than others, but many have the potential to create bonds between different pairs and groups of readers if we open up space for relaxed book blethering.

Books which we live through together for the sole purpose of shared enjoyment represent a rich resource for conversation, for connection and for spinning webs of reader relationships. Such 'books in common' nurture our pleasure in reading and play a particularly resonant role in helping build communities of engaged readers.

For more ideas and examples of teacher practice in developing communities of engaged readers, within and beyond school, see:

<https://researchrichpedagogies.org/research/reading-for-pleasure>

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References

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