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Reading for pleasure and book talk

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Keen readers give themselves daily lessons in life. Through reading they imagine and experience other worlds, develop empathy for others' plights, reflect upon their own lives and emotions, and find out about the past, the present and the future of the real world too. However, readers are never alone in this endeavour. As Margaret Meek (1988) taught us years ago, skilled authors and artists act as critical companions to the young on their journeys as meaning makers, indeed she observed,

'What texts teach is a process of discovery for readers, not a programme of instruction for teachers' (Meek, 1988, p. 19-20).

Equally as significantly perhaps, readers develop their understanding of texts through countless conversations with others. Talk is central to learning to read and to both becoming and remaining a reader. After all, reading is not only a solitary and individual practice, it is also a deeply social endeavour and we are supported as readers when we talk about texts on our own terms.

In this blog, I want to explore the role of talk in Reading for Pleasure, (RfP) particularly informal child-led book talk and share some strategies for classroom practice.

What is informal book talk?

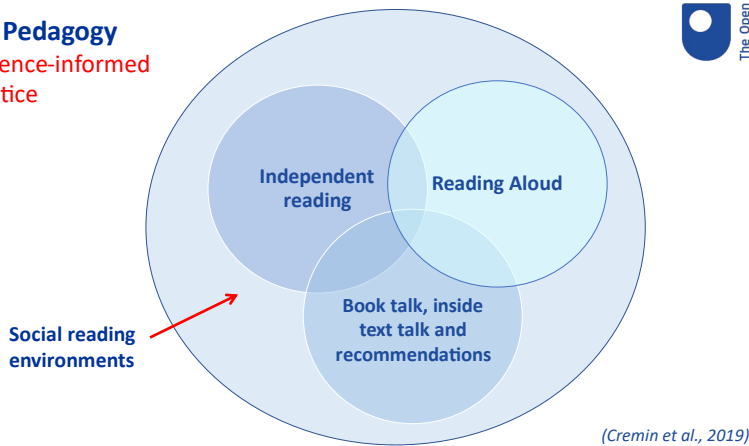
Talk is an essential part of reading instruction; teachers make full use of talk in the context of phonics programmes and when developing children's comprehension. This talk is focused primarily on reading skill development, and is thus primarily teacher-led, teacher-directed, assessed and tethered to a particular part of the timetable. For example, during comprehension when a teacher might be asking questions in order to advance children's language skills and their capacity to justify, elaborate, infer and deduce.

By contrast, informal book talk is primarily focused on the development of the will to read, its goal is to motivate, nurture and support children as readers. So informal book talk is far more child-led, child-directed, relaxed and spontaneous. Engaged readers are keen, motivated and socially interactive about what they read, so all teachers need to provide space and time for children to participate as readers on their own terms and in their own way.

Research underpinning informal booktalk

In the *Teachers as Readers* study, we tracked 45 primary teachers as they developed a RfP culture and ethos and noticed that as they developed their knowledge of children's books and individual readers, there was a marked increase in the amount of chatter about books within and beyond their classrooms (Cremin et al., 2014). Indeed, informal book talk was recognised not only as crucial part of RfP pedagogy, but as a key characteristic of the reciprocal reading communities that developed.

RfP Pedagogy
Evidence-informed
practice



(Cremin et al., 2019)

Children began to seize opportunities to initiate book talk with each other and with their teacher in the classroom, and spontaneously it was also triggered in corridors, on the playground and in other socially supportive reading environments around the schools. These relatively casual and relaxed conversations included a wide range of interactions around books, and encompassed for example: recommendations, predictions, the re-voicing of memorable snippets from the text, warnings about ‘boring’ parts, relaxed responses to and evaluative debates about books, as well as shared delight in the talk that often-accompanied re-readings and re-tellings. As Keith Oatley observes

‘To talk about fiction is almost as important as reading it in the first place’(Oatley, 2011 p.178)

Discussing self-chosen texts on their own terms, can help children make sense of them through a relaxed shared experience. Later studies have also shown the significance of informal book talk (e.g. Coakley-Fields, 2018; Mottram et al., 2022) and in the Open University, a team of us are exploring its role in building and sustaining relationships, and in motivating and supporting readers (Cremin et al., 2024; Rodriguez- Leon et al., forthcoming, 2025).

Policy and practice

The English government (DfE, 2023) recognise the significance of book talk in their Reading Framework and highlight not only the four interrelated strands of RfP pedagogy (seen in the diagram above), but the value of a dedicated time and space for ‘browsing, exploring and discussing books’ (p.96). They call this ‘book club’, and suggest teachers consider providing 20 minutes each week for this to promote books and enable pupils to make recommendations to one another.

Recreational reading needs support, we cannot demand or expect children to read and find pleasure in the process, but we can and should, model and entice, invite and engage, and involve the young in voicing their own views about their self-chosen books and the books we have (or might) read aloud to them. Keeping these interactions low-key and non-assessed will be crucial to their success, so at all costs teachers will want to avoid dominating the space, or formalising ‘book club’ by creating routines and expectations that are not in some core way child-led or child-directed.



However, moving from understanding reading as silent to social takes time for teachers, children and parents, and informal book talk needs scaffolding and support. Additionally, children need informed guidance from knowledgeable others to help them make discerning choices -choices that enable them to create a legacy of past satisfactions, so recommendations from trusted friends or well-read teachers are invaluable.

In order to develop your own practice, and allow more space for the young people to explore the texts available, find out about new releases, choose, make recommendations, debate their views, understand their friends' likes and dislikes and so forth, you will want to employ a range of informal book talk strategies. Those that can helpfully be participated in by pairs, trios, and small self-selected groups are preferable; they avoid the solo Reader of the Week styled 'long turn' syndrome which can be exposing and is unlikely to nurture relaxed book blether that is inclusive.

The OU RfP website has a section devoted to informal book talk, which showcases a wealth of strategies developed by talented teachers. There are also videos, a poster, a podcast and multiple other resources to help you as you move from teacher-led book talk to more child-led informal book talk. So do explore: <https://ourfp.org/finding/rfpp/booktalk-and-recommendations/>

Some really popular Examples of Practice include the following:

- [A Book Blanket](#)
- [A Book Buzz](#)
- [Book Banter](#)
- [Pupil Voice and Choice](#)
- [Peer Recommendations Shelves](#)

Regardless of where or when you engage in informal book talk, or indeed what you wish to call this time, crucially it needs to be focused on nurturing the desire to read. This is your young readers' time, time for them to relax, to browse, to blether and to create connections to texts and to you and to each other. Enjoy!

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