

READING AHEAD

Supporting adult literacy in Derbyshire



Reading Ahead is the new name for the *Six Book Challenge*. See www.readingagency.org.uk

Derbyshire County Council's library service has run the Six Book Challenge (now called Reading Ahead) for a number of years to encourage reading for pleasure with different groups of reluctant readers, including running it alongside the [Summer Reading Challenge](#) and through Surestart for parents and carers; via its Home Library Service; with HMP prison libraries; and with students attending Derbyshire Adult Community Education Service (DACES) classes, which run all over the county.

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Alison Rodger has used the Challenge for seven years as a part time DACES tutor. Leading literacy classes at three community settings - Shirebrook, Bolsover and South Normanton - she often supports vulnerable adults striving to overcome multiple challenges in life, not just low literacy.

"It ignites enthusiasm for reading that has a far-reaching effect on entry level learners' self-confidence and class achievement, with the most astonishing results amongst emergent readers," she says. "It makes reading and libraries accessible to them; suddenly they have ownership of reading material they have felt excluded from, and to receive a certificate at the end is so important to them."

Getting students out of the classroom

Alison finds the Six Book Challenge gives a helpful slant to literacy teaching and learning. "We wanted to make classes less worksheet-based, and get learners out of the classroom," she explains. "An important early task is reassuring them they can read anything to participate - for some of my learners a whole book, even a [Quick Read](#), would initially be too daunting."

Six Book Challenge materials are provided to DACES students via the council's library service, and regular class visits to a library are an integral part of its proactive implementation by Alison and fellow Shirebrook DACES tutor Jane Jackson. For example, they work with reader development librarians to 'show and tell' all the different types of reading that can count towards completing the Challenge, getting learners talking about them and encouraging them to borrow books.

"I had one learner who read an instruction manual and then made a bird box - he got a double sense of achievement!" remembers Alison. She finds the majority of learners subsequently feel more confident about using a library, with resulting positive impact on group dynamics, engagement with reading and involvement with learning.

"This is what adult education is about."

"Library staff are enthusiastic about the Challenge, reporting that it always goes well and that students and their families continue to use the library afterwards. We are now looking forward to promoting Reading Ahead in our communities," says Annabel Wilson, reader development and stock management librarian for Derbyshire County Council.

"One of my newest learners joined South Normanton Library when we had an end-of-Six-Book-Challenge celebration event there," says Alison. "He made a little speech saying how wonderful it was to be part of the group, and how much he had learned. This is what adult education is all about."

Alison also uses things like quizzes to informally engage learners with reading, and credits the Six Book Challenge with helping towards better attendance, spelling and vocabulary. "Don't try to slip it into the end of a class; make reading the whole focus of a session," she advises. "Bring in a box of different books, and show learners the incentives and certificates - people love those!"

Boosting confidence and job prospects



Numerous positive outcomes have been reported. For example, 2012 completer [Martin](#), a jobseeker who hadn't read in years, said: "I felt like I had achieved something; it has boosted my confidence and it might be something I can mention to help me get a job."

Meanwhile, 2013 Bolsover-based completer [June](#), a busy mother and grandmother, said: "I love going to classes - I've made friends and we chat and have a laugh, but we also discuss and write about the books we have read, and the Challenge has given me more to talk about."

2012 completer [Brian](#) was a long-term, full-time carer to his late brother, and subsequently became a jobseeker. He said: "I've now read a lot more than six books; I live on my own and often I don't see many people, so reading helps me not to feel depressed or fed up. It takes my mind off things, and helps me relax."

"It's not corny to say it changes lives."

There have been some particularly dramatic transformations. [Wayne](#)'s undiagnosed dyslexia saw him leave school severely lacking confidence and 'shut out' of the job market. But DACES classes and the Six Book Challenge dramatically turned around his confidence, skills, job prospects and life chances: the 30-year-old father of three now regularly reads with his children and has got a mini promotion.



[Amy](#), 55, comes from a travelling family and did not start to read or write until she recently began attending classes led by Alison. She now also loves reading to her grand-daughter and said: "When I finished the Challenge and got my certificate, well can you imagine how I felt? I'd never been to school or got any qualifications, so it felt really good!"

"It's an excellent programme which gives adult learners real motivation to read more and DACES fully recognises the importance and value of being involved. Being part of a national challenge increases the sense of achievement for our adult learners," says Louissa Adams, family learning curriculum group leader with Derbyshire County Council.

"The Six Book Challenge gives a level of confidence that impacts right across an individual's learning," concludes Alison Rodger. "It's not corny to say that it changes lives."

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