

OUTSTANDING TEACHING, LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT

**FINAL REPORT ON THE OTLA PHASE 6 (ENGLISH) PROJECT -
CREATING A READING CULTURE**

Cambridge Regional College

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Final Report – Creating a Reading Culture

Cambridge Regional College



The concern that we wanted to address in our project was the lack of reading in our learners' lives, whether at home or at college.

Cambridge professor Diane Reay comments –

“Research suggests it is the wealth and inclination of parents, rather than the ability and efforts of the child, that have the most bearing on a child's educational success today. If you're a working-class child, you're starting the race halfway round the track behind the middle-class child. Middle class parents do a lot via extra resources and activities.”

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/nov/21/english-class-system-shaped-in-schools>

Summary

We are a large FE College in Cambridge with a majority cohort of 16-19 year old learners on Study Programmes. We also have a growing number of courses for adults, 14-16 year olds in alternative provision and apprentices.

Within the demographic area there are two well-known and respected academic Sixth Form Colleges and one other Further Education College which is predominately focused on land based Vocational delivery.

Rationale

Our project was initially designed to improve the reading abilities of learners in our 14-16 Alternative Provision. However, soon after the project began there were a variety of challenges which prompted us to widen its scope. We decided instead to explore how a reading culture could be created and promoted more widely and explicitly at the college and so reduce the impact of the social and educational disadvantage that is part of so many of our learners' lives.

We were concerned that our learners identified reading as an activity that they undertook only in an English lesson. We wanted to broaden their perspective on the importance of reading in their lives and the enjoyment it might offer them.

The majority of our learners are enrolled on the GCSE qualifications for English and maths as a mandatory resit programme, having failed often in the past to gain a Grade 4. If they continue to struggle to access the reading material required on these courses, how would they ever progress or achieve? Their experience at college would then just be another failure for them in a list of already failed attempts at school, which would have an overall negative effect on their well-being, self-esteem and motivation.

Being a good reader is a crucial part of attainment in GCSE English and in vocational subjects. We hoped that by creating a reading culture at the college we would encourage increased awareness of the importance of reading in all curriculum areas, at work and in everyday life generally.

Approach

At the start of this project we created a small Professional Learning Community (PLC) called 'Creating A Reading Culture'. The College held a PLC event on a Staff Development Day which gave me an opportunity to design and distribute a simple questionnaire for staff, to help us gain a snapshot of the reading activities that they undertake themselves and the extent to which they promote reading in their teaching (see Appendix 1).

We split the project into the three different strands:

1. Cambridge campus – exploring ways in which we could promote reading generally across the college;
2. Huntingdon campus – focusing on one small group and dedicating a part of their weekly lesson to reading;
3. Cambridge campus – support for a small cohort of Alternative Provision learners, again allocating time for reading and creating a Reading Room.

Finally, we decided that it was important for us to have some training on various phonic strategies to improve reading so I invited Tricia Millar from 'That Reading Thing' to deliver this training in September.

This was attended by some members of my English teaching team, the tutors from the Alternative Provision team, an English Tutor in our SEND Dept and Dom Thompson from Havant and South Downs College who was working on the same OTLA theme.

Professional learning: Evidence of changes in teaching, learning and assessment practices

Strand 1 Creating a reading culture across the campus

In this strand of the project we explored different ways in which we could promote reading across the college (see Appendix 3). Some of the activities we undertook included:

- using marker pens to decorate the walls of a glass bridge (a key walkway in the college), using images and quiz questions based on the driving test
- asking lecturers to complete and put up around the college colourful, eye catching posters with the title of a book they were currently reading e.g. 'Cass Webb is currently reading...'
- buying in a variety of books and magazines to stock a shelf in the student lounge
- holding a Christmas writing competition on the topic of climate change
- lobbying for a popular area of the college called the WigWam area to be decorated with inspirational quotes. We also encouraged the science department to put articles of topical interest on a new noticeboard
- creating 'plant sticks' in a garden area allocated to Alternative Provision students that contain quotes and song lyrics to reflect seasonal celebrations; in the training restaurant at Christmas we involved learners in displaying song lyrics and topical texts on the table number holders.

Strand 2 Dedicated reading in Functional English lessons

Weekly designated reading sessions were introduced into Functional English lessons for a group of Entry Level 3 and Level 1 students on the Huntingdon campus. Over the year they were asked to read a novel, *'One of Us is Lying'* by Karen M. McManus. These reading project 'windows' lasted for approximately 15 minutes at the start of a session and included group reviews.

Strand 3 Alternative provision

We initially assessed our Alternative Provision 14-16 learners using the New Salford Sentence Reading Test which was developed for Hodder Education; this would help us to monitor their progress. We also had informal discussions about their particular struggles with reading. Some of these learners had been home schooled and were not used to college life so they were all dealing with multiple changes in their lives.

As a result, we decided to approach them in a different manner which has resulted in more a positive outcome. We worked with them to create their own Reading Room and encouraged them to invest time in decorating it themselves so they felt they have some ownership in it. Learners have used it to read books, magazines, text books or listen to audio books. We have also provided and actively encouraged the use of 'reading pens' through EHCP funding.

Evidence of improved collaboration and changes in organisational practices

There is now much greater collaboration between the English and the vocational teams. A wide range of vocational areas have embraced this project and are promoting it in a variety of ways. Strategies to improve reading are brought up in Heads of Department meetings and course reviews, and vocational lecturers regularly talk with me about the different ways in which they feel they are able to contribute to the project. Staff are now much more aware of the levels of reading abilities of their learners in their lessons, particularly if they are on a Level 3 course but the learner is working at a lower level for reading.

The introduction of dedicated reading time in Functional English lessons at Huntingdon was successful and will be scheduled into those lessons again next year. Enrichment English sessions are now taking place between 3-4 pm which provide opportunities for learners to drop in and work on their reading skills.

Stronger links have been made with our International/ESOL team in order to share resources to support our learners where English is a second language so that they can improve their reading and vocabulary.

We have successfully recruited our own English Higher-Level Teaching Assistant who will work with specific learners in order to help them improve their reading skills.

Evidence of improvement in learners' achievements, retention and progression

Case Study 1 – this learner has demonstrated improved behaviour, attendance, motivation and progress in learning, both in her English lessons and also across her whole timetable.

Case Study 2 – tutor observation/Q & A and feedback reviews involving individual and groups of learners confirm that there have been small but important incremental changes in learner attitudes towards the activity of reading in the dedicated reading session. One tutor commented, 'The initial impact of the reading project has been overwhelmingly positive.'

Case Study 3 – encouraging learners to set up and take ownership of a Reading Room, change its décor and not enforcing them to utilise it has meant that they now freely use the room to access a variety of reading material

Learning from this project

This project has been a real eye opener for us as an English team. However, I feel we have only just started to create a reading culture at the college and much more remains to be done.

It has also confirmed our expectation that a whole college approach is important to achieve a significant increase in changes in learner attitudes towards reading. Nevertheless, it has also shown us how supportive different college teams can be, from the Senior Management Team through to the Facilities Department. I have met some incredible and interesting people and I am in no doubt that I will continue to keep in touch with them. They have kept me motivated and inspired throughout.

The guidance and collaborative workshops provided by the ETF have been invaluable along with my extremely supportive and knowledgeable Strand Lead and Mentor who have provided us with continued support and encouragement at all times.

Appendix 1 – Staff survey



**Name:
(optional)**

**Job
Title/Faculty:**

Are you currently reading a book?

Yes/No If yes, what is the name of it?

Do you like to read?

Yes/No If no, why not?

Were you read to as a child?

Yes/No If yes, can you remember your favourite book?

Did you have a library card as a child?

Yes/No

If you have children, do you read to them?

Yes/No If no, why not?

Have you ever used an audio book?

Yes/No If no, why not?

When you read, is it a book, kindle or other method?

Book/Kindle/Other If other, please state what:

When you go on holiday do you take a book/Kindle or neither?

When was the last time you checked out a book from the LRC?

Do you do any reading activities with your learners?

Yes/No If yes, please give an example:

Are you dyslexic?

Yes/No

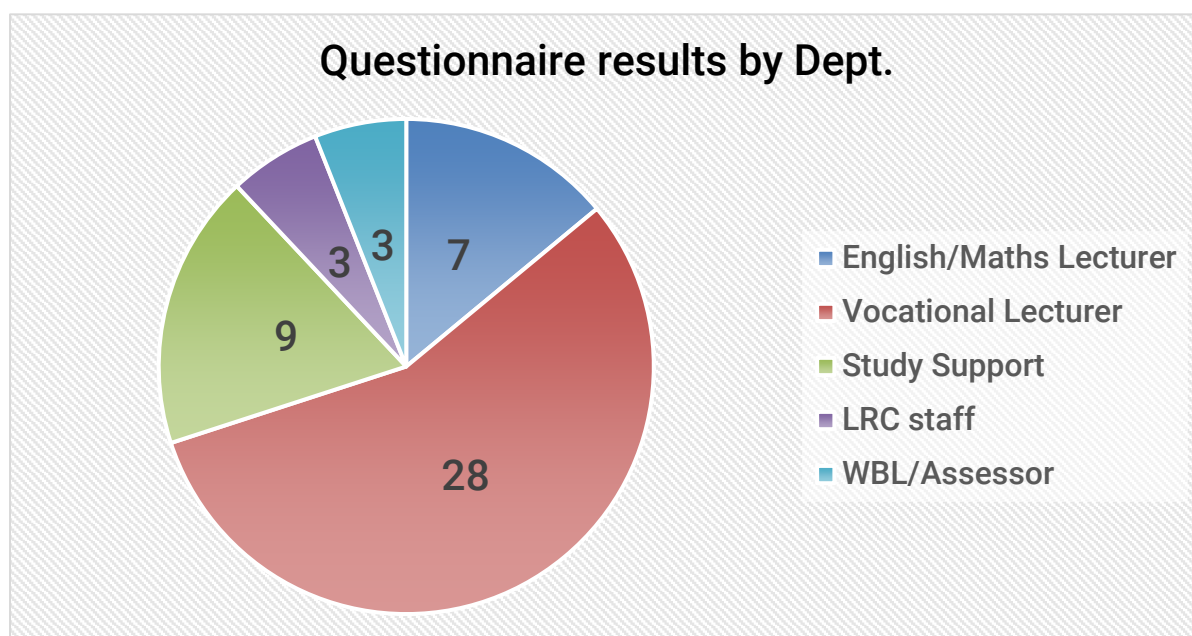
Do you have any other reasons why you struggle to read?

Appendix 2 – Staff Survey Results

As an initial research activity, we were keen to discover what the existing 'reading culture' was within the college. We wanted to know the kind of reading activities that our College staff undertook on a regular basis and so we designed a survey and set up a Professional Learning Community group called 'Creating a Reading Culture'.

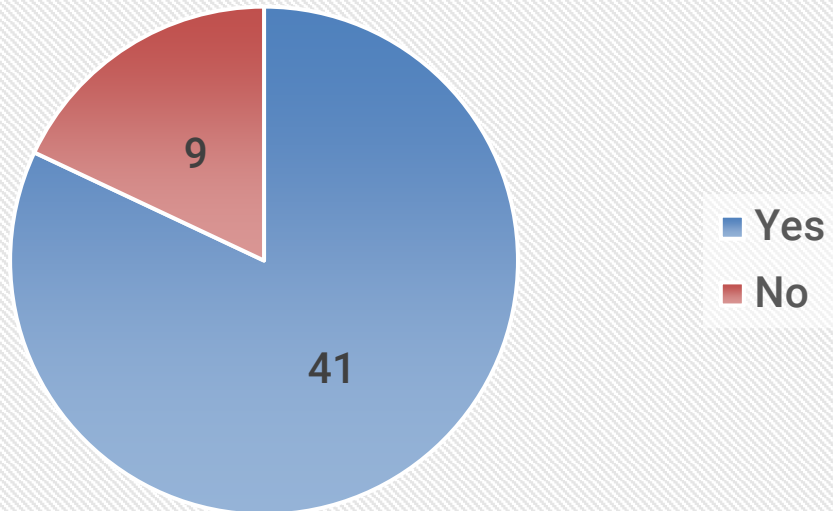
On a Staff Development Day there was a Professional Learning Community event whereby all PLCs showcased what they were about. I chose this event to distribute the questionnaire, collated the results of 50 members of staff that completed it and my findings are as below:

I was interested to see the job roles of the staff who completed the questionnaire as I wanted to involve a range of staff, not just English Lecturers. I was pleased to see that the majority of the questionnaires were completed by vocational staff as I was concerned that there was not enough investment in reading in some departments.

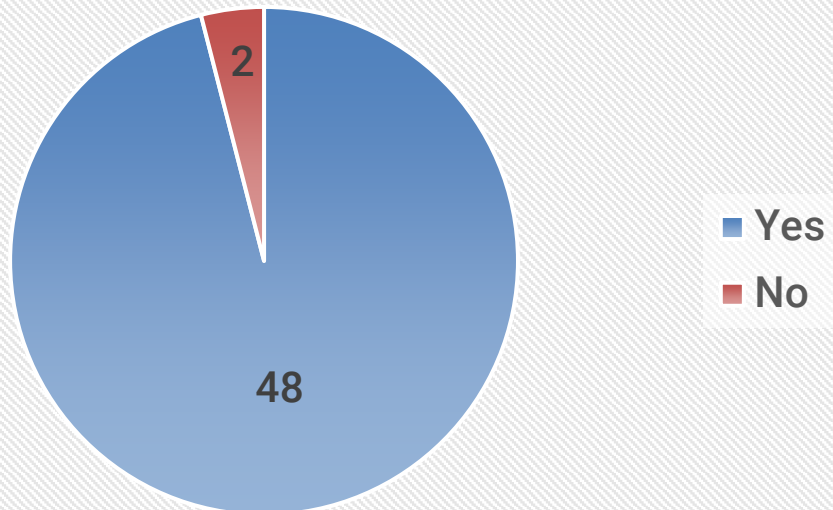


The survey results below confirmed our expectation that there is a clear correlation between the involvement of parents in reading to children and the enjoyment of reading in adult life.

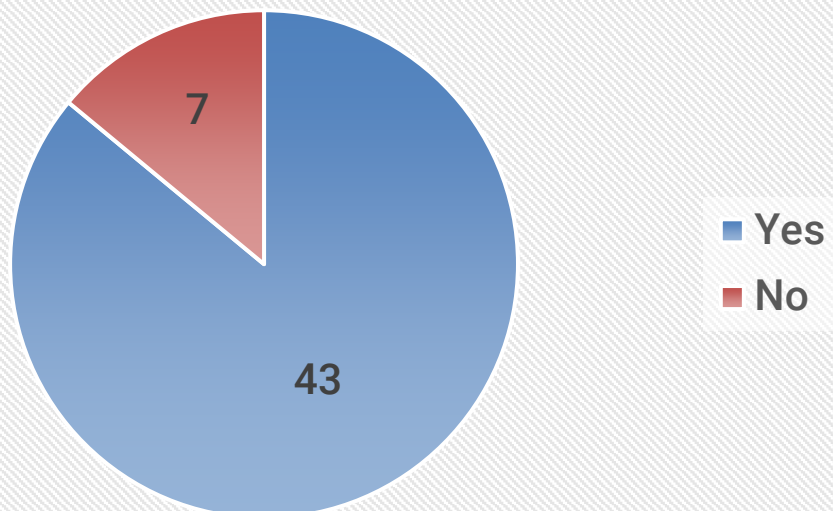
Are you currently reading a book?



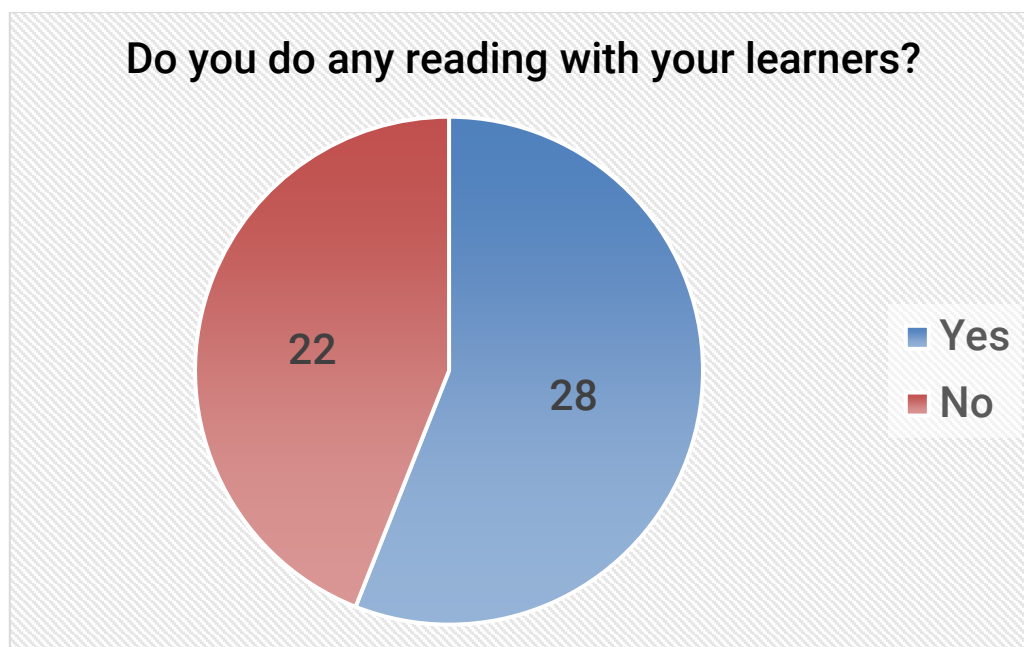
Do you like to read?



Were you read to as a child?



The last question asked staff if they include and promote explicit reading activities in their teaching. It was disappointing to see that 44% of staff do not encourage or promote reading within their lessons and so fail to take advantage of the opportunity to develop their learners' technical vocabulary and comprehension skills. More explicit support with reading and vocabulary would be particularly helpful for learners who have English as a second language.

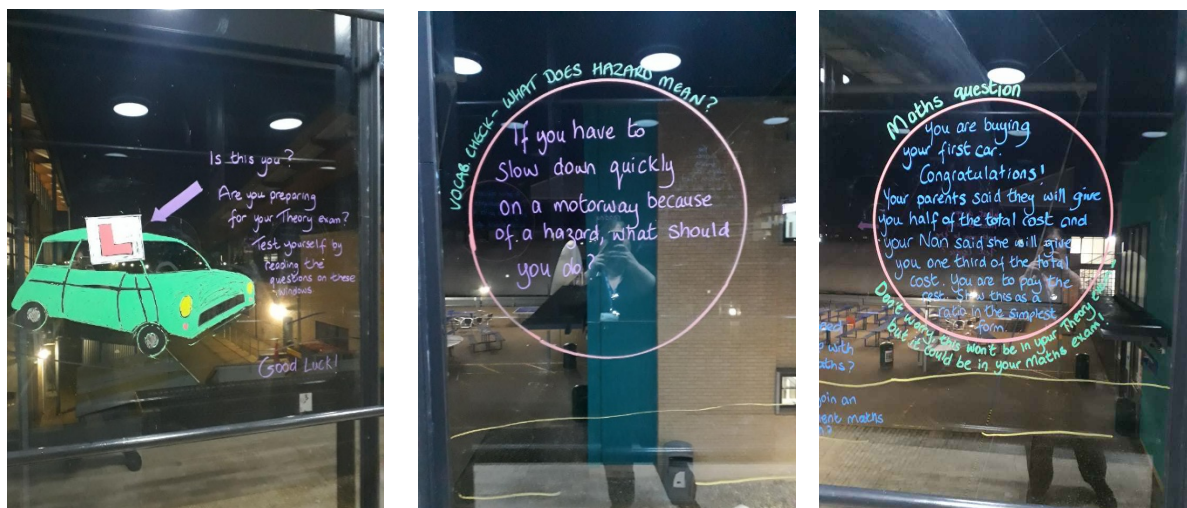


Whilst the survey was quite limited in its content and the number of respondents wasn't large or representative, the results indicated staff enjoyed and valued reading and that we needed to encourage staff to share their enjoyment of reading more explicitly both in lessons and generally in the college.

Appendix 3 – Strategies used across the college

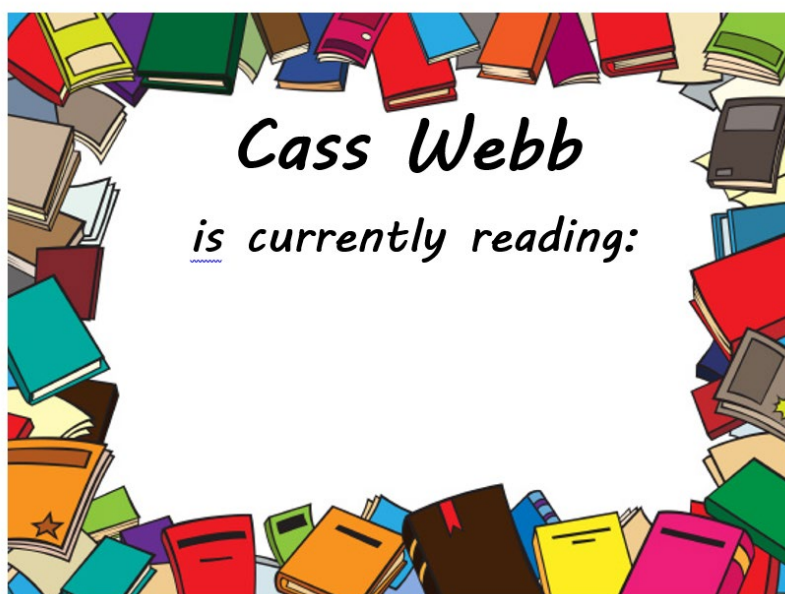
1. Glass Bridge

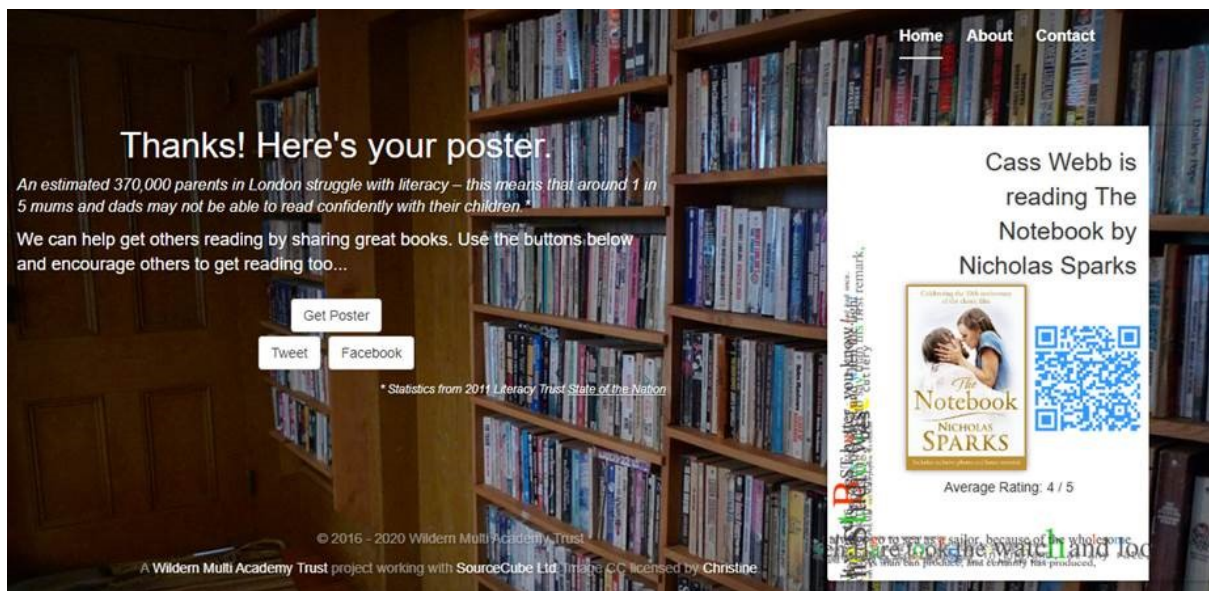
For this we purchased some marker pens that would write on glass. We took advantage of a bridgeway between two of our blocks as the walkway was enclosed by glass windows. We wanted to use this empty space to provide a reading opportunity for students as they walked between blocks, and I wanted it to be something that was relevant and age appropriate. We therefore used some of the driving theory questions and wrote them within road signs on the windows. An image of Mr. Bean lightened the mood and enticed the learners to read the text.



2. Staff Poster Displays

Staff within the College were sent these posters and asked to display them in their Vocational areas with their names on them. The wording was sometimes amended e.g. My favourite book is... but it always had the name of the staff visible. Learners sometimes aspire to be like their 'favourite' tutor and we wanted these displays to show the learners that reading does not just take place in an English lesson.





3. Book Box/Magazine Racks

I sourced and collated a variety of books and magazines. We positioned a bookshelf and a magazine rack in the Student Lounge to encourage learners to look at these whilst they were eating lunch or hanging out with their friends. The Student Lounge is a 'safe and student friendly environment' so I wanted to take advantage of this. The magazines have proved to be more popular than the books at this time.



4. Writing competition

At Christmas we held a Writing competition in conjunction with The Bank of England on the topic of Climate Change. We submitted the 5 entries to The Bank of England but decided upon 20 that we would use and produce in a booklet. A copy of this booklet would be provided to each of the writers along with copies of this being distributed in prominent places within the College. This booklet is still in progress of publication but it is the hope that our learners will want to read each other's work in a different format in line with our 'Creating a Reading Culture' project.

5. WigWam area

At Cambridge campus there is an outside area which our learners affectionally nicknamed as the WigWam area. Adjacent to this is a blank wall. We were desperate to take advantage of this and wanted to have some form of texts painted or written on it. After discussions with the Facilities team, we decided that we would submit a proposal to our Senior Management Team for their permission to fix Perspex sheets onto the wall once a few of our Art learners painted the extracts/texts on them. The proposal was accepted and we are currently deciding on suitable and appropriate texts. We want them to be aspirational and empowering in line with our College values whilst also being something that the learners could have some affinity with.

6. Garden

A designated piece of garden was allocated to our Alternative Provision learners. Whilst planting in this space, again we decided to take advantage of another way to encourage reading. As a result, at Easter 2019 and Christmas 2019 it was decorated with plant sticks that held quotes or song lyrics relating to the specific holiday.



7. Restaurant

We have a commercial restaurant that our learners also work in to gain experience in hospitality and catering. At Christmas and leading on from the plant stick concept, we liaised with the Catering team and decided to take advantage of the table number holders and used them to capture song lyrics and some well-known extracts from Christmas books.

8. Science Board

In a corner part of the College that is usually bare, the Science team created a noticeboard and they keep it up to date with various articles relating to Science and current issues. Students are encouraged to source articles and put them on the board.

Case Study 1 – Use of a reading pen

This case study is based on a L1 Beauty learner who started with us in September 2019. From day one she was extremely disruptive and distracted learners in her English, maths and theory sessions. Her vocational tutors had nothing but praise for her in her practical sessions and were struggling to understand the poor behaviour. Her attendance in English and maths lessons was patchy and as a result, she was being issued with 'disciplinary's'.

Some initial comments about her behaviour were:

"Constant bad attitude throughout English and refusal to follow rules around phones etc. She arrived 10 mins late with no explanation as to why and refused to do work when asked. She also continued to send a message on her phone while being asked not to. Continued to argue with me when I pointed out she wasn't allowed to do this accusing me of favouritism. She then refused to go outside the class to talk to me. Stormed off at the end of the lesson saying she wasn't helped enough"

"XXX did absolutely no work whatsoever despite having it explained to her. She was polite and non-confrontational but simply refused to write anything at all even when given a sentence to scribe. She was also late to the lesson."

"XXX wrote nothing at all in the lesson despite being asked to several times. She said she could not be bothered turning up before and was only here for the register mark. I supplied her with differentiated work and tried to explain/simplify the task for her repeatedly."

Impact of the use of a reading pen

When I met with the learner and discussed her behaviours, it was discovered that she struggled with her reading. We provided her with a reading pen to use initially in her English lessons but she has really embraced this and now uses it in her maths and theory lessons. This learner has made great progress and the number of her 'disciplinary's' has reduced. Through her EHCP funding a reading pen of her own has been ordered.

Case Study 2 – Dedicated reading in Functional English teaching

The students read the assigned novel, *One of Us is Lying* by Karen McManus within their designated reading sessions every week. The novel is to be completed by the end of the academic year. These reading project windows are once a week at the beginning of the timetabled reading session and last for approximately 15 minutes including group reviews.

All the students involved in the project are a mix of 10 Entry Level 3 and Level 1 Functional Skills English students.

Evidence of learner progress is formulated by the following:

- When students have read for ten minutes, brief verbal reviews of the story so far for each are offered for peer group discussion.
- The tutor guides the micro reviews - this will often involve a brief enquiry into elemental structure, character, and language analysis.
- Any relevant applications to current coursework topics and/or examination preparation are also flagged and discussed.
- Peer reviews of the story are exchanged, discussed and summarised by the tutor at the end of the reading project session.

Starting points of view were initially, and unsurprisingly, tepid and quite negative. This was largely due to students not belonging to, or feeling they belonged to, any type of obvious reading culture. Subsequently, the enthusiasm for reading as an activity under any reasoning was seen as laborious and of little utility to them.

Impact

The initial impact of the reading project has been overwhelmingly positive. We started the project at the beginning of the academic year. This began with an initial group discussion about their reading histories:

1. Are you currently a regular reader?
2. Were you read to when you were younger?
3. Can social media be considered a legitimate reading platform?
4. Is there a consensus about the activity of reading among your demographic?
5. What obvious beneficial applications exist with the activity of reading?

As time has gone by, there has been and continues to be incremental changes in attitudes to the activity of reading by the students. This is evidenced in the practical activity itself as well as the feedback that follows each short reading session. For example, when the students are reading, a palpable sense of concentration and interest in what they are undertaking can be objectively monitored and assessed – tutor observation/Q&A and reviews offered up by the students individually and as a small core group. The students will complete short written summative reviews once they have completed reading the novel in the lead up to their exams towards the end of the academic year.

Case Study 3 – Reading support in Alternative Provision

When starting to work with the group of year 10 students, we discussed the attitude that they have towards books and reading. They all were open that they had had a difficult relationship with books, and in the past had only read when they have been made to do so at school. We discussed their lack of confidence in reading text aloud and all stated they felt uncomfortable about this.

We also discussed the type of stories they liked and related it to the genres of films that they watch. We discussed whether they had read any books that had been made into films and whilst they all knew of books that had been made in to films, they had not read them.

It was clear that reading activities that involved just a single source such as a novel was not going to work, with this group. We decided that we would look at bringing in and introducing different books and extracts and we involved students in creating a Reading Room. We have involved learners in working with us to set up and decorate the room so that they take ownership of it.

We also decided to look at the vocabulary of the group and look at expanding this. This also would support the new standards of the Functional Skills English exam which looks at vocabulary and meaning. This included getting them to improve their use of the dictionaries or learning how to use them

We then looked at the work of Roald Dahl and his selection of books. The two books we focused on was Matilda and the BFG. We had a lesson where learners were looking through his books, for descriptive passages about characters in the book, and exploring how he described them. We had lessons on looking at the words that Roald Dahl creates in his books and the effects that they have. We also discussed themes that were present, and the moral of the stories, if they have them. Learners engaged well with the books and the stories.

Impact

In the GCSE lessons we run every few weeks, we have been reading extracts from Catcher in the Rye and other texts that some of the learners would not have come across before, despite being on the set text lists as many have not been educated in school. We are also looking at Romantic poets and reading Old English texts to look at the changes in language over the years.

These are difficult texts that would not normally be introduced to the learners due to the level and motivation of the learners. However, the project has encouraged us to experiment a little more during the reading sessions. It has also provided them with the opportunity to explore a variety of texts/books by themselves to see if they can determine what particular genre they like the best. This is a substantial turnaround for these learners, bearing in mind that they did not read at all prior to this project.