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**Boosting achievement through reading for pleasure – The Manchester College**

The Reading Agency’s Reading Ahead programme challenges participants to pick six reads of their choice (short texts such as poems and magazine articles as well as books) and record, rate and review them in a small print reading diary in order to get incentives along the way and a certificate on completion. The Manchester College has been running Reading Ahead since 2012, recording their greatest success so far in 2016 with 338 completers.

It has been championed through the college library service with former librarian Janice Banner coordinating activity until her retirement early in 2017. *“Without Reading Ahead there wouldn’t be as much reading for pleasure going on in the college. It motivates all staff and students to get reading. And there is a noticeable increase in students reading more once they have completed the challenge.”*

Her legacy is a Rolls-Royce operation now coordinated by Jenny Officer with library staff and tutors on board across all ten campuses. Use of Reading Ahead is mainly focused on ESOL provision where students from pre-Entry upwards are working towards Functional Skills qualifications. But it is also used to support independent reading for a range of students such as those on Access courses or with special needs such as dyslexia.

At St John’s campus, for example, librarians Debra Carr and Anne Braddock keep a bulging file of records and are full of praise for the way in which tutors encourage their students not just to take part but to complete the challenge. They cite a Nigerian student Imafidon Enotiemwonmwan who could barely write last year but is now producing well-written book reviews. Another of a Polish student who has read more than 25 books now that she’s got started.

Once registered for Reading Ahead, students are supported to write their reviews with a framework of what to look out for in a book such as the characters, plot, what they learnt and whether they would recommend it.

Students choose from a selection of reading materials to take part in Reading Ahead:  newspapers, magazines, Quick Reads, fiction and non-fiction. Library staff create displays to promote new titles, run themed competitions and prize draws with prizes such as chocolates – anything to keep everyone reading. Popular titles include books published by Gatehouse, New Leaf, Quick Reads and graded readers from a range of ELT publishers. One class divided titles from the Readwell Road series between groups of four who each read and discussed their book and then talked about it to the other groups to build up a picture of this imaginary street created for adults learning to read.

Yacob Yonis, Departmental Team Leader for ESOL, thinks a key factor in the success of Reading Ahead is that participants select their own reading materials: *“They have to choose. That triggers the joy which is the beauty of it. It’s like a gateway. Stories are the same around the world, just in different languages.”*

Listening to the CD of a book while following the words is a popular entry point. Reading to children is another way to improve the whole family’s skills. Just taking a book home is also an important step: *“We don’t speak English every day at home so this helps us to practise English with our friends and families,”* explains Habte whose own language is Arabic. *“You can tell them about the story.”*

Herrera, an Entry 3 Italian student, explains the benefits: *”Reading is the best thing you can do. It doesn’t just help you to read it helps you speak clearly as well.“*

ESOL tutor Jotshna Petrillo feels the students’ activity around Reading Ahead has a big impact on her. She integrates it into her weekly three-hour English class despite having many topics to cover. *“I used to encourage them to read but didn’t really think they would take it up. Now that they are all doing Reading Ahead it raises my expectations and I feel pleased that they are contributing to their own learning.”*

It’s also important that Reading Ahead has the endorsement of senior staff such as Gill Scott, Quality Leader for the LTE Group. *“Reading underpins every aspect of our curriculum at the college,”* she says*. “It’s a challenge in FE with the emphasis on GCSEs and employability but we should recognise that reading helps students to build all the skills they need. It’s difficult to correlate the impact of Reading Ahead precisely but we see students progress and we have excellent results for Functional Skills.”*

**Top Tips**

* Make it a whole-college programme so that different campuses or departments have a sense of pride in their own results.
* Build it into class time so that students expect to have to write and talk about what they have read each week.
* Give guidance on how to select books by looking at covers and information about the author and content.
* Get students and staff sharing their reading and recommending books to each other.
* Keep clear records of students’ participation so that you can see their progress at a glance.
* Celebrate everyone’s achievement even if they have not completed six books – it may be first time that they have done any reading.