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Chapter 3: Sharing a Class Reader

Lorna Smith and Lucy Kelly

Introduction

‘Reading is a conversation,’ writes the author Mark Haddon (*The Guardian*, 2004). ‘All books talk. But a good book listens as well.’ The idea that reading is a conversation, and that books talk and listen, are central concepts in this chapter because, whilst the ‘portable magic’ (King, 2000, p. 104) of books can be experienced independently, the *real* magic might happen when you communicate this externally to others. The oral tradition of storytelling exemplifies the importance of sharing a book through talk; silent reading was almost unheard of until the tenth century (Hall 2014 in Brindley and Marshall, 2015). Interestingly, this reading pattern appears to be mirrored in school: pupils come from primary schools where reading aloud and talking about books is common practice yet, at secondary level, silent – or independent – reading seems to take over. Rather than being consumed in one go, reading often becomes ‘distended and disrupted and [...] is experienced as an indigestible product’ (Westbrook et al, 2018, p. 67).

This shift in reading culture has implications. Performance in International Student Assessment (PISA) data (Videbaek, 2020) suggests reading for pleasure declines amongst secondary pupils. One explanation could be that pupils are not sharing stories in the same way as in their earlier schooling. When the dialogic practice of reading – talking about books and sharing them orally – is limited or absent, can pupils experience the same levels of engagement? Or, could a ‘classroom community’ (Bloome, 1986, p. 71) fostered on shared reading prevent ‘readicide’ (the ‘killing’ of reading by schools) (Gallagher, 2009, n.p.)? These big questions cannot be answered within the parameters of this chapter; however, the popularity of adult book groups appear to demonstrate a desire to return to a shared reading experience as members of a reading community (Cremin, 2019), one that is a ‘fully social activity’ involving friends, family and students (Meek, 1991).

Therefore, in an era in which choice around texts may be limited, and pressures of time and accountability reduce the scope an individual teacher might have, this chapter offers research-informed, practical suggestions on how to approach a whole text and bring active learning into the classroom.

At the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- understand the impact of collaborative reading, including the affordances of reading together (and how to meet the challenges of reading together);
- celebrate the reading experience by sharing a text in as sustained, uninterrupted way as possible;
- understand how to reposition the teacher as reader, so that they are engaged in the reading process to explore, discover and find out alongside their pupils, as opposed to being seen as the ‘expert’;

- foster a reading culture through which individual interpretation is celebrated and avoiding a prescriptive approach.

Reading Teachers

It is generally assumed that English teachers are great readers (borne out through research suggesting most English teachers come into the profession because they are lovers of literature (Blake and Shortis, 2010)). Whether or not this is true of your own route into teaching, you will certainly have read a lot of books. Many will have had a tangible or intangible impact on your *relationship* with reading, something of critical significance that will have changed you as a reader. Perhaps you remember the book that first consciously engaged you emotionally, or your first ‘grown up’ book with chapters that marked your growing maturity as a reader, or the book that prompted you to see something with a fresh perspective. Activity 3.1 now invites you to consider these in more detail.

Activity 3.1: *My Life in Books* (inspired by Gabrielle Cliff-Hodges’ ‘Rivers of Reading’)

-Think of ten books that have had a ‘critical’ impact on your reading history (Cliff Hodges, 2010, p. 181). The list may include some of your favourite books but will not necessarily be restricted to these. Write the title and author of each on a separate sticky note (so that they can be easily moved around) or into a whiteboard app.

-In a different colour, note down *why* each book is important.

-Arrange the list in the order in which you read them, to reveal the ‘story’ of these critical incidents in your reading history. Cliff Hodges suggests using the metaphor of a river, which illustrates well the ‘dynamic’ power of reading (2010, p. 184): rivers actively shape their course within the geographical context they are situated, just as readers can shape their future.

-What do your reflections on this process reveal? Does seeing your reading trajectory from this perspective offer any new insights about you as a reader?¹

It would be interesting to consider if any of the texts on your list in Activity 3.1 are those that you read in school. Yet even if some are, it is unlikely that any of your classmates experienced that text exactly as you did. You formed your personal interpretation, your own ‘authentic’ reading (Giovanelli & Mason, 2015, p. 41); they will have formed theirs; these readings may have been similar but they will not have been (and nor should they have been!) identical: a single text is open to interpretation and ever-changing, depending on the

¹ You might now try rearranging the texts differently, such as by i) chronological order of publication; ii) theme or by genre; iii) how and where you read them. What additional insights does this provoke? Develop the cards into a display or collage; if you are working electronically, you could develop a Prezi or PowerPoint, with one text per slide (see Cliff Hodges’ article listed for examples). (This activity also works well in a classroom and is a good way to encourage pupils to articulate their own relationship with books.)

reader. Those ‘critical incidents’ (Cliff Hodges, 2010, p. 181) are the result of the interweaving of your context, your life experience and the text. It is through this ‘exten[sion] of experience’ that a reader is impelled – implicitly or explicitly - to question their assumptions and challenge preconceptions (Bleiman, 2020, p. 154). From a classroom perspective, one of the reasons for teaching a shared text is because it enables us to stand in the shoes of others. Within the pages of a book, we can time-travel to the past or future; we can explore new worlds and cultures; we can become different people.

Further, while the words on the page are fixed, perhaps their richness lies in the ambiguities, the ‘gappiness’ (Smith, 2020, p. 3) between them. This makes them alive in unpredictable and changing ways, and each reader will interpret both the words and the gaps differently and dynamically. Through the shared experience of reading in the classroom we can together read between the lines, explore the ambiguities - the gaps - to co-create a version of the text. This offers an enriched, enjoyable, reading experience for all involved – whilst simultaneously enabling pupils’ individual readings to be owned and celebrated. These readings are stored in pupils’ personal ‘narrative schemas’ (their own independent mental ‘scrapbook’ for each text) (Giovaneli and Mason, 2015, p. 45).

Thus, this chapter encourages reading together for enjoyment, pleasure and understanding – even with texts one has not chosen to read. We emphasise the value of creating a reading community (Cremin, 2020) within the classroom, one where we support each other to move forward in our ‘reading apprenticeship’ (Meek, 1991, p. 31), and celebrate the diversity of readers (from committed, habitual readers to those less confident, less experienced) within the group.

Developing dialogic readers in conversation with the text and each other

It is no light challenge for an English teacher to help perhaps thirty individual pupils simultaneously ‘converse’ with a text in a personal, meaningful way. They may appear reluctant, you are pushed for time, resources may be lacking. However, reading together, collaboratively, offers opportunities. In Activity 3.2 we look first at some practical considerations to help you set up shared reading in your classroom, then move on to suggest some activities that capitalise on the experience that a reading community provides.

Activity 3.2: *Planning the reading experience*

In the table below, column 1 summarises some of the typical challenges that communal reading in a classroom might present, from both the perspective of the pupils and the teacher, while column 2 provides some suggestions to address these creatively. We invite you use column 3 to consider what you might do in your classroom, inspired by your wider reading, practice and reflections. You could use the Key Resources at the end of this chapter as a starting point.

Challenges	Opportunities	In my classroom
<i>Getting started</i>		

<p>The classroom context is not conducive to pleasurable reading</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create an attractive reading environment – regularly replace book posters on the wall; establish a <i>Reading Recommendations</i> display. • Experiment with the classroom layout: arrange desks in islands, a horseshoe or circle to facilitate a supportive environment. 	
<p>Pupils resist the choice of text being made for them</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer your class a choice of text - read the first few pages of several texts; ask them to vote (Potts, 2011). If this is not possible, explain that the given text will be read, but ask pupils to recommend a book that <i>you</i> should read. Commit to reading it; devote some time to discussing it. • Encourage pupils to become agentive readers, more willing to experiment, by recommending texts to each other (Laurenson, 2015). Make explicit your own reading choices (Cremin, 2009). 	
<p><i>Logistics: too much to read, not enough copies, too little time</i></p>		
<p>Limited time available</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As discussed in more depth below, plan to read the text as quickly as possible, avoiding spoilers or activities that deaden the thrill of the narrative (Westwood, 2011; Giovanelli and Mason, 2015). • Rather than ‘skipping’ parts of the text to cram it all in, choose a shorter text. Short stories are an under-used resource when it comes to teaching whole texts – search online by author or genre (e.g. Goodreads.com). • Watch a film version <i>before</i> reading, treating the film as a multi-modal text that offers the full narrative arc and enables you to revisit key episodes in the text afterwards, drawing attention to the choices made by the script-writer and director in the adaptation. 	
<p>Limited access to texts means that pupils do not have a copy each, and school policy might mean</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide audio recordings or podcasts. Audio versions of most popular texts are commercially available, but you could record your own (a particularly valuable investment of time if you are likely to teach the text again). • Ask confident readers to record certain sections/chapters, individually or in small groups – 	

<p>texts cannot be sent home.</p>	<p>the decisions they need to make regarding pitch, tone, voice, sound effects etc. inform their own critical appreciation too.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If the text is available online, download and share – in a suitably large font – via an interactive whiteboard (and/or pupils’ phones). This also allows for a multi-modal approach: illustrations and images can be included to add interest and support understanding (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001; Sacks, 2013). 	
<p>Accessing the text</p>		
<p>While reading round the class means that everyone can participate, the flow and audibility is often impeded.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read the text aloud yourself (having rehearsed properly first!). This model allows for a powerful shared experience (Rosen, 2019). • Do not <i>insist</i> that your listeners follow the text: perhaps allow them to doodle instead, inspired by what they hear. Comparing the images they produce is a useful ‘way in’ to discussion. • If the text has a lot of dialogue, individuals can take on roles, turning the classroom into a quasi-theatre. Invite the readers to the front; a background image on the board can set the scene effectively and provide a focal point for the audience. • Sections are read chorally, either by the whole class or groups, or sections are read aloud by groups with background music/sound effects added (Dymoke, 2009). • Allow pupils to choose their approach: they can listen to you reading, join a table group where pupils read to each other, or read quietly, independently. Dreyer (2003) recommends they should have the freedom to change groups when they wish. 	
<p>Pupils are unfamiliar with the context/genre/author</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contextual knowledge does not need to be taught before reading: almost always, context is revealed <i>through</i> the text (Westbrook, 2011; Bleiman, 2020) – the Latin ‘<i>contexere</i>’ means ‘to weave together, connect’ (OED.com). Encourage pupils to consider the context <i>as they read</i>: instead of teaching about poverty in Victorian Britain before embarking on <u>A Christmas Carol</u>, read Stave One and ask students 	

	<p>to discuss Dickens’ perspective on the social conditions described.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capitalise on cultural capital available in the class, gained either through their own life experience (a pupil might share how it felt to be newly-arrived in the UK when reading <u>Pigeon English</u> (Kelman, 2012)) or their reading of other texts on similar themes. 	
The vocabulary is antiquated or obscure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rather than pre-teaching unfamiliar vocabulary, gloss words as you go, so that new vocabulary is introduced in context; or read a section of text, check that pupils have got the gist, and <i>then</i> go back to clarify individual words. • Evoke pupils’ morphological and semantic knowledge to speculate on definitions, before encouraging them to confirm using a dictionary. 	

We now elaborate some of the points in Activity 3.2 as we discuss how to create a rich, dialogic reading classroom. As suggested, it is dialogue and discussion that enables teachers to use their own developed ‘narrative schemas’ in a positive way with pupils coming to a text for the first time - ‘first-time readers’ (Giovanelli and Mason 2015, p. 46). A classroom culture that celebrates a shared experience for all enhances authenticity and engagement because pupils are encouraged to continually share their developing schema through talk, using it to try out, develop, and reflect upon their ideas in light of feedback from the other ‘reading apprentices’ (op cit) in the room – including the teacher.

Uninterrupted reading and nurturing individual responses

You have used Activity 3.2 to help you plan the reading experience, set the scene, mindful of the importance of creating the right environment. The next challenge is to apportion reading time. Research suggests that it is more effective to read the text quickly over successive lessons, without interruption, rather than breaking it up. Getting through even complex novels in a swift, sustained manner repositions ‘poorer readers’ as ‘good’ readers because ‘in a faster read, the text becomes coherent, reading experienced as a collaboratively constructed, active and engaged process’ (Westbrook et al, 2018, p. 67). Conversely, if the reading experience is slowed down and artificially chunked to fit pre-made activities, then a single ‘authorised’ (Giovanelli and Mason, 2015, p. 53) view of the text is presented through which the teacher, a ‘re-reader’, guides ‘first-time readers’ (2015, p. 46). There is a danger that lesson tasks and teacher discourse – while expert and well-meaning – could hinder pupils’ ‘authentic engagement’ (ibid) with the text. We therefore recommend that to maintain engagement and support pupils develop their own authentic readings, it is preferable to front-load the reading of the text at the beginning of a

scheme of work and then revisit and discuss salient points when the pupils are also ‘re-readers’.

This approach avoids pupils being given ‘manufactured’ (Giovanelli and Mason, 2015: 42) readings, either accidentally, through the framing of the lesson, or deliberately – albeit with the best of intentions – for exam purposes. It is easy to see why, in a climate of accountability, ready-made readings (and their written counterpart, PEE paragraphs) are sometimes prioritised in the English classroom (Gibbons, 2018), but this method is limiting. Instead, the oral rehearsal of ideas during and after the sustained reading experience improves pupils’ writing about the text because it gives them the confidence to break away from the many ‘constrained and constricted’ (Gibbons, 2018, p. 37) writing templates governing English classrooms: it enables them to see the ‘bigger ideas’ and the ‘text in a larger sense’ (AQA, 2018, p. 7). It is these *unmanufactured* responses – rather than ‘shoe-horn[ed]’ (AQA, 2018, p. 6) answers showcasing a ‘reductive view of a literary text’ (AQA, 2018, p. 7) - that GCSE examiners look for.

Practical activities to support readers and re-readers

We now provide some examples of dialogue-rich strategies to help individual readers clarify, reflect on and deepen their understanding of a text, whether they are first-time readers or re-readers. These ideas can be easily developed and adapted for any secondary age group (and undergraduate level too).

First-time readers: activities to engage, intrigue and inspire

Although we are making the case for swiftly reading a text from start to finish, we would also suggest that devoting a single lesson to hooking learners in through focusing on an interesting, short passage *before* the sustained reading starts can be very effective. It introduces them in a light-touch manner to genre, setting, theme, characterisation, plot – all aspects that they will need as they go on to explore and analyse the text – and gets them asking questions about what might come before or after. And, of course, given that some examination boards include an extract-style question, the following extract-based activities are also useful at the re-reading stage for GCSE preparation.

In response to the research revealing the lack of representation in the range of texts typically studied at secondary level (Smith, 2020), we have deliberately chosen for purposes of illustration a text written by a woman that features a man in a childcare role: George Eliot’s *Silas Marner* (1861)². The eponymous Marner is a weaver, victimised for his religion. He comes to adopt a daughter, Eppie, when she wanders into his remote cottage as a toddler.³

² *Silas Marner* is offered as a GCSE text in the 2015 AQA and Edexcel specifications.

³ It would be interesting to compare *Silas Marner* to *Boys Don’t Cry* by Malorie Blackman (2010), which also features an unusual father-daughter relationship between teen father, Dante, and the baby he did not know he had, Emma. It appears on the 2019 Edexcel GCSE specification.

This dramatic extract is taken from the middle of the novel when Marner fears he has lost Eppie. Before starting, engage pupils by asking if they have ever lost anything precious to them – what does it feel like? – and then read the passage together.

The terrible fact burst upon him: Eppie had run out by herself—had perhaps fallen into the stone-pit. Silas, shaken by the worst fear that could have befallen him, rushed out, calling “Eppie!” and ran eagerly about the unenclosed space, exploring the dry cavities into which she might have fallen, and then gazing with questioning dread at the smooth red surface of the water. The cold drops stood on his brow. How long had she been out? There was one hope—that she had crept through the stile and got into the fields, where he habitually took her to stroll. But the grass was high in the meadow, and there was no descrying her... The meadow was searched in vain; and he got over the stile into the next field, looking with dying hope towards a small pond which was now reduced to its summer shallowness, so as to leave a wide margin of good adhesive mud. Here, however, sat Eppie, discoursing cheerfully to her own small boot, which she was using as a bucket to convey the water into a deep hoof-mark, while her little naked foot was planted comfortably on a cushion of olive-green mud. A red-headed calf was observing her with alarmed doubt through the opposite hedge. (Chp 14).

1. Ask readers to discuss in groups what they *like* or *enjoy* about this passage. You could then probe further: does Marner’s rising panic remind them of their own emotions when realising something had been lost? Encourage them to question the text using ‘how, what, why, where, when, who’ question stems as prompts. Here, they might ask: *Why did Eppie wander off? How must Marner have felt when he found her? What sort of father-figure is he?* Pupils can then discuss possible responses to the questions they pose. You as the re-reader should avoid providing the answers, thereby inviting the development of pupils’ own authentic readings instead.

2. Alternatively, invite pupils to choose three words that interest them (you could be more specific, asking for a noun or adjective, etc., depending on the text). Get them to compare and contrast their choices, then to drop a single word into a word cloud app such as <http://www.worditout.com>. Duplicates are fine - even encouraged - as the size of the words in the cloud is proportionate to their frequency.

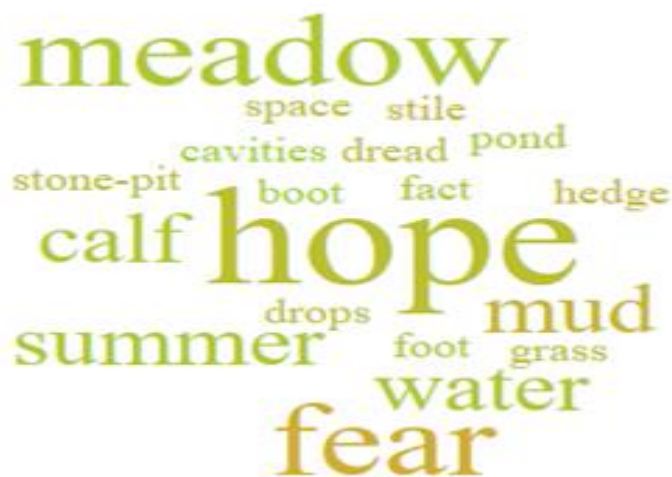


Fig 1 – a word cloud created from 30 responses to the question ‘Which noun interests you most in this passage?’

Ask pupils what they notice and discuss what is interesting. Here, they might contrast hope and fear, or notice the semantic field of nature. Challenge them to explore further by writing a 50-word-story based on the cloud; share the stories – themes will emerge between them that are likely to be themes in the text itself.⁴

This focus on lexis prompts discussion on what sort of story they expect and is also an introduction to context: what do we learn about where the story is set, and when? Initial predictions will be progressively confirmed (or refuted) as reading progresses, and new questions will emerge.

By this point, pupils will have a flavour of the characters, plot, setting, context, and theme. This passage can act as a fulcrum or reference point for the rest of the reading. You can now start at the beginning of the novel and read up to this point, pause and reflect, before continuing.

Re-reading: activities to explore, critique, consolidate understanding and prepare for examination.

We have argued that it is important to read the text quickly, to ensure that the reading experience retains integrity. Yet, at the same time – as readers ourselves who might turn down a page or highlight a passage on an e-reader – we know it is helpful to track the action, record salient moments. Writing about what has been read has the effect of ordering and ‘harmonizing’ (Britton, 1982: 110) one’s thoughts, so keeping a simple reading log, perhaps completed in the final 10 minutes of a lesson, can be valuable.

⁴ Word clouds are also an interesting way to enable analysis. If you have access to an electronic version of the whole text, drop separate chapters into a word cloud, then compare them to explore how ideas and themes develop between chapters (Rank et al, 2011).

However, we know that another reason why some pupils are reluctant to commit to books is because they assume that reading is the precursor to writing (Westbrook, 2011), and we want to retain the active reading dynamic. We therefore suggest in Table 3.1 some time-efficient activities that can be used during first reading and (more effectively) during re-reading, to provoke rich dialogue and thereby support ‘active comprehension’ (Cox, 1989: 135).

Table 3.1: Multi-modal activities to support active comprehension

Encourage pupils to:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>actively reflect on the text visually through images, diagrams, mind-maps, story boards, family trees, collages; and include their own reactions to these events;</i> • <i>engage imaginatively through ‘hot-seating’ characters, inventing author interviews, etc., perhaps recording the conversations on their phones;</i> • <i>develop inference and analysis by posing each other further ‘how, what, why, where, when’ questions, focusing on what is known to the reader and what is inferred;</i> • <i>analyse motivation and reaction by rewriting a given passage from another character’s perspective;</i> • <i>consider characters’ and authorial perspectives by rewriting a given passage as a film script, including director’s notes on characterisation, setting, mood, tone.</i>

Not everybody should necessarily complete the same activity: by providing a menu of tasks from which pupils can choose, each creating outcomes which will be shared with peers, you can provide a subtle, inclusive means of differentiation. All these approaches enable pupils to develop deep understanding of how and why the author presents characters, plot and themes – the central elements of GCSE essay questions. Collated in a shared area online, the outcomes to the activities make invaluable revision resources.

Summary and Key Points

- ‘[R]eading without satisfaction is like the desperate attempts we make to keep a car going when it has run out of petrol’ (Britton, 1982: 35): it does not work. Fostering a reading culture where individual interpretation is celebrated and valued can recharge our pupils’ reading batteries and put the ‘satisfaction’ (ibid) back into reading.
- Using strategies that encourage engagement with the whole text and immersion within it will give pupils – and you as the teacher – the confidence to take ownership of the text, internalise it and make it their own (which will, where relevant, also lead to examination success).
- Creating a classroom environment founded on collaborative reading nurtures everyone’s development as readers, writers, thinkers, and humans.

Key Resources:

1. Cox's (1989) *Approaches to the class novel* remains one of the best collections of activities to prompt dialogue and engagement when reading a class novel.
 - Cox, B (1989) Appendix 6: Approaches to the class novel in English for ages 5-16. Available at:
<http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/cox1989/cox89.html>
2. In *Rivers of reading*, Cliff Hodges (2010) looks at the habits of committed, habitual readers, and thereby invites consideration of how to inspire others. Illustrated examples of pupils' Reading Rivers are effective models for your own classroom activity. Cremin (2019) builds on this work from the perspective of teachers in *Reading communities: why, what and how?* with practical suggestions of how teachers can draw on their own reading for pleasure in the classroom.
 - Cliff Hodges, G. 2010. Rivers of reading: Using critical incident collages to learn about adolescent readers and their readership. *English in Education*, 44 (3), pp. 181-200, DOI: [10.1111/j.1754-8845.2010.01072.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-8845.2010.01072.x)
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3. Giovanelli and Mason (2015) in 'Well I don't feel that': *Schemas, worlds and authentic reading in the classroom* and Westbrook et al (2019) 'Just reading': *the impact of a faster pace or reading narratives on the comprehension of poorer adolescent readers in English classrooms* argue for a swift first reading of a text, referring to classroom-based research supported by evidence from both teachers and pupils.
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