

8 DIY steps to build a reading culture

Give ownership of reading culture to staff and students, not software.

Thousands of UK schools have invested in online “reading acceleration” schemes which claim to foster a richer reading culture and to improve students’ motivation to read. Typically such a programme will cost a school of 1000 pupils about £5000 per year for licences (including discounts for longer periods such as a three-year term). However, the school will also have to invest in computers, tablets, books that are represented on the reading scheme, and library administration time, for example to categorise and sticker books according to the reading scheme’s leveling system.

The upshot of all this is that an accelerated reading scheme will likely cost the school considerably more than the price tag of the licences. Based on the information given in this EEF study, the figure appears to be over £200 per student – plus opportunity costs.

Schools may find some value in such a package, especially if the funding is readily available and the shiny new product helps students to feel that they are part of something novel and exciting. It feels positive to have a display of students’ reading mileage; and when Ofsted comes calling it is always helpful to hand over a sheaf of statistics showing how reading levels and mileage are being tracked.

These, of course, are advantages of form, not substance. The realities of substance are somewhat different. Any novelty will certainly wear off with time; for those students who have already experienced the programme in primary school, there will not be a novelty factor. There are other ways of tracking student progress in reading, and with more depth and greater reliability. Lastly, the success of the system does not actually rely on the software – it relies on the motivation, organisation and enthusiasm of the staff promoting it.

Then, of course, the big question is: do such schemes actually assist reading progress? The answer appears to be, not much – and for the weakest students, not at all. (See this post for example). If you are a student reading three years behind, this approach will not enable you to catch up during your entire five years at secondary school.

The fact is, we don’t need to import a system when we already have able and intelligent staff who know their students. Points on an IT system are only going to motivate most teenagers for a few minutes. It is the interactions between staff and students that build motivation, and that provide the foundations for a reading culture. Limited resources should be targeted where they are most needed.

But what if it was possible to achieve the same outcomes without spending that £5000 per year, plus setup costs? Here are 8 steps to building a reading culture without resorting to an unnecessary software package :

1. If you want to track progress, students need to be placed at their appropriate reading level. Many schools rely on the online test that comes with their accelerated reading package, such as the STAR test. Such a test has its limitations: scores often bounce around, and student test motivation appears to play a huge part. You may, however, already have a standardised test that is used to track whole school reading. A test like the NGRT or Suffolk Reading Scale will give you reading ages and standard scores. If your school hasn't yet put such a system in place, it's a high priority to do so.
2. You don't actually need to level books. Students can use the five-finger rule: if there are five words on the first page that they really don't know, then it's probably at too high a level. Encourage them to try harder books but to come back to you if they are finding it too tough. But if they really want to read it, shouldn't they? We don't want to restrict students from reading more challenging books, do we? What matters is that the student has chosen it and is committed to reading it.
3. If you do want to level your books, you can do so for free using the online readability calculators from this site: <http://www.readabilityformulas.com/free-readability-calculators.php> We recommend the Dale-Chall Calculator as it's been updated with the 3000 most familiar words and it achieved the best reliability in a comparison of leveling tools. Just paste or type in a sample of text from 100 – 600 words in length. The grade level is shown and there is a comparison chart that you can use to identify the approximate reading level by age range. You can build up your book leveling information like this over time – it can be a student project, a reward activity, a task for school librarians, even a competition between classes. With my former Head of English hat on, I would make it a fifteen minute task for pairs of students during their weekly library lesson. It can be fun for them to guess the reading age of the text and then check it. One can read out loud while the other types in the sample. Students then record the results, for example on a Google sheet or on a hard copy. The librarian can manage these records.
4. What about quizzes? Students will develop as much comprehension – if not more – from developing their own quiz questions as from answering someone else's. Have students create the quiz questions for the books, (and record the answers). Again, these quizzes can be stored in a central area on the school library network so that other students can take them when they have read the book. Someone will have to check these are right, though – but that can also be a student task. Importantly, digitally stored quizzes can be modified in a 'wiki' format wher the community continuously improves the quality. You're not restricted to IT here- low tech is usually better than high tech, because it's stable and cheap. There is nothing wrong with a filing cabinet and folders with photocopies of quizzes in them – students can then keep their completed quizzes in their reading folders.
5. Don't restrict students to quizzes as the only response to a book. I've made a list here but there are lots of others online. The important thing is that students are motivated both by the book and by the response activity. Response activities create opportunities for different types of displays, talks, presentations, and

emulative writing – all of which give reading culture a high profile, and with greater variety, than a chart outside the library with pictures of the same smiling faces at the top every month. Think music, dance, poetry, readings, fan fiction, film versions, cover designs, interviews, radio reviews.

6. Be flexible about how you apportion recognition. You will know your students. You will know which ones don't have a room to themselves, who are travelling long distances to school, who are between two homes, who have family crises. Software can't respond to that. Ensure that a range of attitudes, effort, and ability are recognized – for example, Edith gets a certificate because she increased her reading by 100% this month. That may mean she only read two books instead of one, but the recognition probably means a lot to Edith, and because the big step she has taken has been recognised, she is more likely to keep trying. Likewise, if Sam in Year 9 has just finished reading his fiftieth classic novel, that deserves a mention in assembly and some sort of award. Such recognition should become a normal part of the school routine – it's at this point that it becomes part of the culture.
7. Tracking student reading miles. Again, students can do a lot of this themselves – what they read, and when, should be recorded in a diary or a reading passport showing all the “reading places” they have visited. Parents can be involved by having students read a self-chosen passage to at home; parents sign the passport or reading log. Sometimes having parents ask students for reading recommendations can be a great way to turn the tables and put the students in a position of authority and knowledge. Some schools opt for reading logs where students have to write in response to their reading every night. If your school programme allows teachers to check this writing every day, great, but it isn't necessary to track reading mileage.
8. Tracking student reading attainment. If you are running a standardised test as a means of tracking student progress annually, that will give you enough data for the bulk of students. However, for students at the weaker end, you need to track progress more carefully in order to ensure that they are indeed catching up. The best way to do this is to ensure that they are in an appropriate intervention with a reliable tracking system. There aren't many out there (most just use a pre- and post-test) but there are some. But if you're not spending money on an external reading promotion scheme, you will have extra resources to put into these students, who need the most help. Use it wisely!

It may seem that all this relies on the strength, commitment and enthusiasm of the school librarian and the English staff. That's because it does - they are indispensable to the success of *any* reading promotion scheme. Handing over the ownership of that process to the team who will deliver it is much more likely to bring long-term success than asking them to fit into the pre-programmed systems of a multi-national software company. And you won't have to hand over thousands of pounds every year.