

Bookmarks, badges and bells: a different kind of book club

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This informal book club was launched last year and continues to be popular amongst Early Childhood Education and Care undergraduate students, staff and their children. This article describes how this has developed into a community of enthusiastic readers.

How did it all begin?

As part of their optional Children's Literature module, second year students study picture books for children of all ages. This is new territory for many of them. As one reflected: 'I'd never looked at a picture book the way that I do now...' and another explained: 'I love it how intense you can make the turn of the page - you can put as much tension on it as you want'. Part of this enthusiasm for picture books was inspired by a talk by the renowned author Aidan Chambers who outlined his 'Tell Me' approach to fostering a love of books with children (Chambers 2011). He emphasised the need for an up-to-date, enthusiastic working knowledge of children's literature in order to make informed choices and recommendations.

A half term opportunity

The first opportunity to try out Chambers' ideas came in a teaching session that coincided with the half term school break. The majority of students attended, bringing eight children whose ages ranged from five to twelve. Everyone brought a picture book to share and talk about. It was a very enjoyable experience and all the children participated with enthusiasm. We talked in small groups then moved around different tables to look at examples of other books, completing a sheet with a short comment or a pictorial symbol and a score out of ten for each book. At the end of two hours we added up all the scores.

Meg's Eggs by Helen Nicoll and Jan PienKowski	
Comments	Mark out of 10
It's got lots of colours as well as text. The pictures can amuse younger readers and they stand out with the bold fonts.	7
Bright colours, simple text, children love witches!	7
Funny story, simple to read	7
Colours are bold and bright and the illustrations are simple	7
It is good for younger ages because there are less words and the illustrations are good.	9

A completed comment sheet

The winner was *The Jolly Postman* by Allan and Janet Ahlberg. As the experience was so successful, it was agreed that we would form a book club and meet regularly during each school holiday.

The first official book club was again a resounding success. We had decided to broaden the repertoire beyond picture books this time to cater for different tastes. The children who attended, twins of eight and a six year old, were very articulate about their choices and listened carefully to one another. They asked questions about the books and took considerable care writing their comments and deciding on scores. The winner this time was *The Railway Rabbits: Berry goes to Winterland* by Georgie Adams. The younger child told us about her school book club which seemed to have an inordinate number of rules and rituals that included blowing a whistle at the beginning and end. After some discussion we decided that as the club was held in a room in the university library, a bell might be more appropriate. We spent some time designing club membership cards and negotiating several more rules including: 'you have to bring sweets'.

Book club rules:

- You have to bring sweets
- Bring at least one book per person
- Read the book before you have to present it
- Discuss in a group
- Try to remember your membership cards if possible
- The bell will mark the beginning of the beginning and end of the club
- Write a book review and send to lecturer Karen
- Take a register to know who is here
- The club will last about an hour
- Be kind to each other
- Use different colour pens

A flexible formula

The next club was attended by different children with their parents, one unaccompanied student and a member of staff with her two children. It became clear that it didn't really matter how many people came, or how regularly, because the formula seemed to work whoever was there.

We started by reviewing the draft rules and rituals which everyone solemnly agreed to. There was good discussion about a range of books and the winner was *The Peanut-Free Café* by Gloria Koster. I was again impressed with how seriously the children engaged with the task of listening, sharing and writing. One of the older children offered to be the club secretary and to type up the rules for distribution.



We ended by asking club members to choose a postcard from the Puffin collection to take away. Everyone enjoyed looking at the different images, exclaiming about those they recognised, remembered and wanted. Making a decision between *The Snowman*, *The Secret Garden* and *Charlotte's Web* was particularly difficult for one child, but resolved when she realised that we would provide this selection at the end of every club.

A week later, one of the students told me how excited her six year old son was at being part of the club. He had been a reluctant reader in the past but now spent time at home deciding which book he was going to bring to the next club and why. His teacher had also noticed his sudden enthusiasm for books at school. Another student explained that her son now discusses books with increasing confidence:

'I enjoy watching him interact with not just other children but adults as well. Book club has improved his enthusiasm for reading more and instead of asking for the electronic devices all the time he is more than happy to sit and read different books. He has now scored Level 3 for reading in his SATs which is above average for his age group.'

The most recent club was attended by both new and familiar faces and all were delighted to receive their membership badges and free bookmarks. The winner on this occasion was *The Gruffalo's Child* by Julia Donaldson, just two points ahead of *A Cautionary Tale: Jim* by Hilaire Belloc and Mini Grey. This time we had an unaccompanied nine year old child join us as his mother was busy working in the library. He seemed to relax into the proceedings very quickly, another example of the flexibility of the club. Although he had not brought along a book to talk about, he soon joined in with the questions and happily added his comments about each book. Those who had attended more regularly were very confident and relaxed with the familiar routine.

What next?

The parent of the child who has developed an on-going enthusiasm for the book club is now considering analysing his changed attitude to books as a dissertation focus. As a result of experiencing the Children's Literature module and the book club, two other students are also interested in further exploring how their own children read for pleasure.

Students taking this module have had the opportunity to extend their existing knowledge and understanding about the subject through participating in the book club and will be well equipped for working with children in the future.

There is no doubt that the book club has been successful so far and having been featured on the University website it has attracted some interest from other students on different programmes. We may need to develop a parallel book club instead of trying to accommodate an influx of new people into the established reading community. On the other hand, the experience of having an ever changing organic group has been one of its strengths. We also need to continue to take note of the children's views about improving the book club, such as Tavonga's suggestion that we might: 'bring a book and the author and the illustrator to talk about what inspired them to make the magnificent book' - an ambitious, but possible development.

We like book club because:.....

We could share all the books that we read and discover what we don't know about it. Tanaka, aged 9

I like to look at everyone else's book and go to the library. Madison, aged 7

You get to interact with other people you don't know. You discover more books to read. Charlie, aged 11/12

You get to talk about your books, show off your books and learn about other books. Jake, aged 9

You are able to read new and interesting books and you are able to rate it - I rate the Newman book club excellent. Tavonga, aged 9

I enjoy it because I can look at books that I haven't read or seen before, and I can show the other children my books that I like and explain what happens in the story. Nathan, aged 6

I liked the book club because it gave us all the chance to show the others what we enjoyed reading and maybe introduce them to new books. At school we have a good library of books - you can only choose the books that are thought to be suitable for your age which is a bit annoying sometimes. Ben, aged 12

Reference

Chambers, A. (2011) *Tell me: Children Reading and Talk*. The Thimble Press.

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