

# **OUTSTANDING TEACHING, LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT**

**FINAL REPORT ON THE OTLA PHASE 6 (ENGLISH) PROJECT -  
CREATING A READING CULTURE: USING ACCELERATED  
READER TO IMPROVE READING SKILLS**

**Bolton College**

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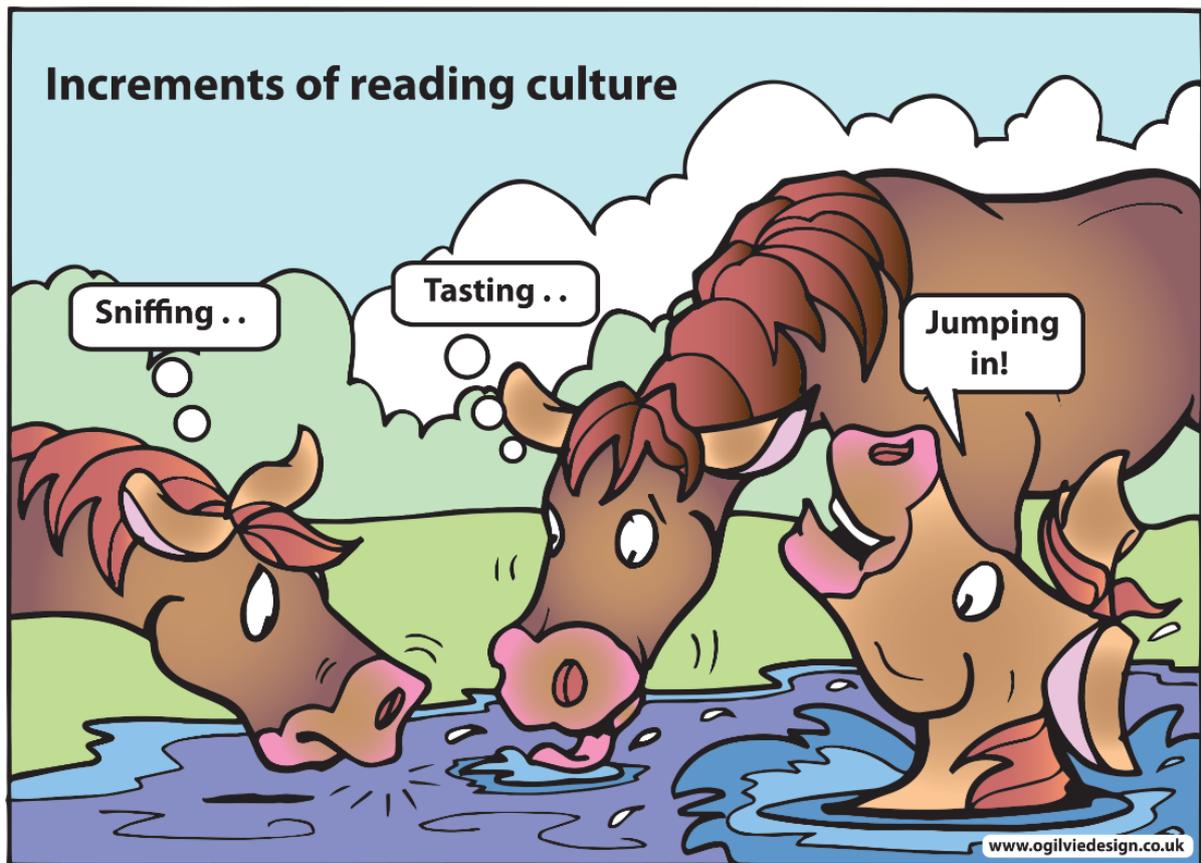


## Contents

Final Report - Creating A Reading Culture: Using Accelerated Reader to improve reading skills.....	2
Appendix 1 – Initial questionnaire.....	9
Case Studies .....	10

# Final Report - Creating A Reading Culture: Using Accelerated Reader to improve reading skills

**Bolton College**



This project set out to engage with learners who had the weakest performance in relation to national rates in 2018/19. Learners were engaged with the Accelerated Reader programme, where a software assessment identified areas of development and the reading level.

## Summary

Bolton College is a Further Education college located in the North-West of England that provides a range of vocational courses to both young people and adults.

The English department chose classes from Foundation Learning (FL) and the vocational area of Motor Vehicle. The project involved regular liaising between English tutors, Foundation Learning tutor, Motor Vehicle tutors and the library. Learners were then provided with a weekly one hour-long dedicated reading time in the College Library within their vocational hours, using texts which met the level of ability identified by their Accelerated Reader as well as their interest.

## Rationale

Our aim was to address why low-ability students resisted reading for pleasure and thus denied themselves the benefits of developing thinking skills. A report (Ofsted, 2017a) acknowledged that Bolton had 16 year old students scoring below the

national average for 5 or more GCSE passes and a higher unemployment rate than the North-West average. Nearly half its population were among the country's 25% most deprived areas. To make matters worse, other recent studies (Duncan et al, 2014; The National Literacy Trust, 2010; Hernandez, 2011) show a clear relationship between poverty, a lack of reading fiction and secondary level education failure.

The vast majority of our young learners do not identify themselves as active readers and certainly not readers of fiction. Many dismiss reading fiction as a non-functional skill that has little relevance for improving their lot; and many have created significant barriers to any learning that uses it. They often identify it as an obsolete skill, especially given the ready availability of non-textual content for instruction and advice.

Further, if reading must occur, they generally prefer to access it electronically, and self-sourced because of an underlying mistrust of institution-provided content and ideas. Consequently, learners often associate 'reading skills' with texts that do not hold their interest and consequently become disengaged from learning. We reasoned that, by instituting a regular timetabled event in which students read fiction, we might provide them with an environment that would begin to normalise the reading of fiction in a relaxed environment.

The ultimate goal was to improve student retention and academic outcomes. We chose Motor Vehicle for our project because it is typically composed of academically lower-achieving students who, in turn, often struggle to engage with the rigour of the tertiary level of the subject. We also chose Foundation Learning students, showing a similar relationship between low academic achievement compounded by special educational needs and disability (SEND).

## Approach

- The English tutors decided on an action plan and a questionnaire which comprised open questions and mind-maps (see Appendix 1). The intention was that learners should develop an appreciation of the fact that they already used reading for purpose and that they had patterns of reading already in place.
- The location and manner of the reading was discussed. It was agreed that the library was the best environment within which to encourage an enjoyment of reading. This was also the best place, with its computers, to run the Star Tests and Accelerated Reader book quizzes that measure progress. Accelerated Reader training was necessarily undertaken by the English tutors and Library lead. The test itself stipulated a reading age and therefore required a level-appropriate book. The library staff had already colour-coded books from a shortlist of texts containing quizzes, as suggested by Accelerated Reader. It was easy to learn and control this system because it produces reports that guide progress for each learner and class (see Figure 7b-1).
- English tutors liaised with the library manager to consider the appropriateness of existing stock for the anticipated reading levels of students. They also sought to buy in further stock that would engage Motor Vehicle students, mostly males and

typically very low ability readers. We decided on abridged versions of contemporary fiction and graphic novels.

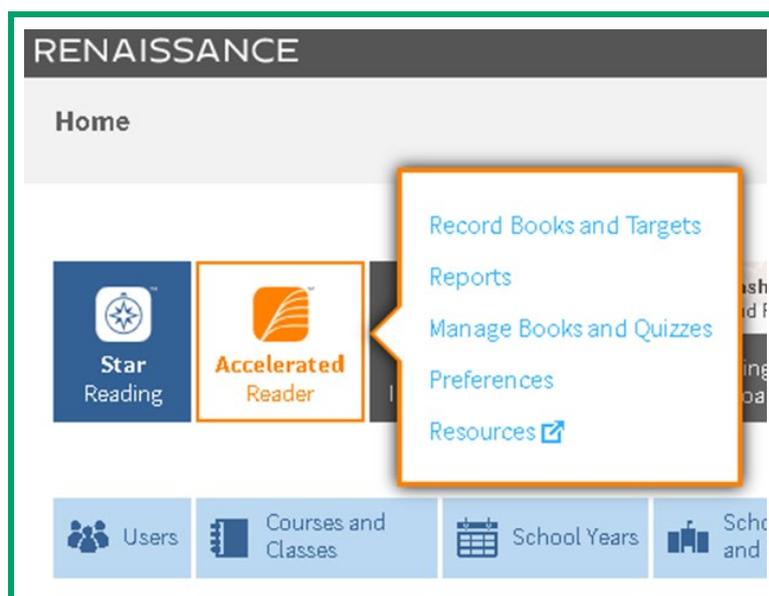


Figure 7b-1: Screenshot of Accelerated Reader interface

- Between September and December, Motor Vehicle and Foundation Level lecturers brought students to the library for an hour on a weekly basis. They were guided by the librarian and English tutors to the dedicated reading section of the previously selected texts and encouraged to find a space and place to read. Learners initially didn't mind the testing system, accustomed as they are to online exercises, and were able, with generous support from English tutors, to decide on an accessible, colour-coded text to read over the coming sessions.
- Learners attended the sessions on a weekly basis. This proved slightly problematic, as it sometimes clashed with coursework deadlines, together with the fact that several were often absent on the day. However, the way to normalise the students' reading and generate momentum was to gently insist on this schedule; many learners responded by attending consistently and finding a quiet place where they could settle in to read for 30 minutes or so.
- Learners often sat in front of computers to read texts, but this proved a distraction, as did their access to personal devices. A degree of discipline and advice was cautiously offered. Learners would interrupt their own reading by checking or using their phones, and tutors would carefully discourage the habit for fear of affecting the positive reading atmosphere we were attempting to institute.
- At the end of December term, students completed a test to measure any changes in Reading Age, completed questionnaires regarding their reading enjoyment and discussed the project and their feelings in focus groups.

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

- The key revision to standard practice was the use of vocational area time to support the learners' enjoyment of learning in an environment that promotes a peaceful approach to reading. All tutors agreed that the library was by far the best environment in which to encourage the students to relax and explore texts.
- Learners offered mixed responses. Some felt they had regained an interest and enthusiasm in reading fiction for pleasure and went on to being more engaged users of the library.
- The findings from the Accelerated Reader Star tests and the focus groups, plus the feedback from the vocational area relating to the time constraints placed upon them, has suggested a more diverse and strategic approach to the use of both time and student-type. Foundation Learning level students showed a slight rise in Reading Age overall (see Figure 7b-2), with one or two notable improvements suggesting a very positive reaction to the practice (see Figure 7b-3).

Reading Age	
Pretest Avg	9:02
Posttest Avg	9:10
Change	+0:08

Figure 7b-2: Class Average of Reading Age in Foundation Learning

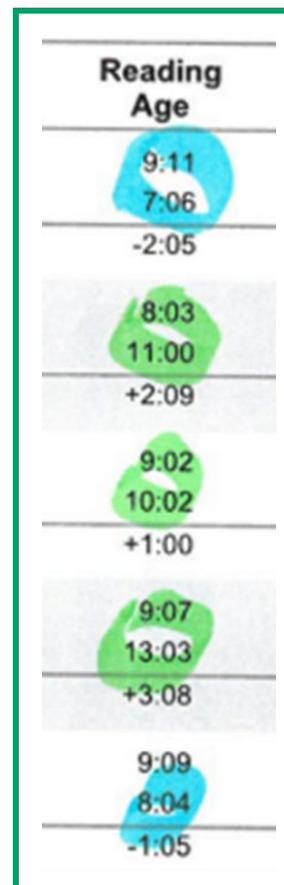


Figure 7b-3: Individuals pre-test and post-test Reading Age in Foundation Learning

Test Date	Test Time	SS	NRSS	PR	PR Range	Reading Age
26/09/2019	17m51s	1340	129	97	95-98	16:06
12/12/2019	14m59s	1183	113	81	73-87	15:07
Change		-157	-16	-16		-0:11
26/09/2019	19m8s	891	104	61	53-66	13:01
12/12/2019	19m8s	1232	115	84	79-91	16:00
Change		+341	+11	+23		+2:11

Figure 7b-4: Motor Vehicle - Individuals' progress

- Because of focus group feedback, we have begun to explore the best genre of texts available to engage the learners in more bespoke ways. Many students agreed with Motor Vehicle tutors' suggestions regarding vocationally-oriented texts, veering away from the fictional element but nonetheless expressing a wish for an ongoing reading-enriched environment on a weekly basis.
- Instituting group discussion to explore the nature and enjoyment of reading was met with mixed and interesting reaction. A revised approach to the use of time is being considered.

### Evidence of improved collaboration and changes in organisational practices

- The project has shown how successfully different areas of the college can collaborate when negotiating a cross-curricular initiative that could potentially have resulted in conflict or apathy. Through regular emails and, more usefully, face-to-face discussion, all parties were able to find resolutions for the key issues of student motivation and class availability. On several occasions Motor Vehicle wanted to cancel the session but we compromised by taking one class instead of two, or selecting students who were not about to miss a deadline for their coursework.
- The profoundly hearing-impaired learners, both of whom scored particularly low on the Reading Age could still use interest-appropriate texts according to their needs, thanks to discussions between the students, English tutors, the student support staff and the librarian.
- All stakeholders agreed that the project was sound in principle and were keen to support it on an ongoing basis. A revised approach to timetabling was discussed in order to place less pressure on individual students who were falling behind on their Vocational course, whilst being mindful of the fact that these students are likely to be why this project is running.
- Foundation Level students, with the lowest Reading Age scores in the cohort, particularly benefitted from a regular period of reading for pleasure, so this has remained in place.
- English tutors have gone over to Motor Vehicle for face-to-face discussions about the ongoing conduct of the project, offering support and suggestions to find ways how best to motivate the students.

## Evidence of improvement in learners' achievements, retention and progression

The improvement in the two different sets of learners, Foundation Level and Motor Vehicle, need be presented in different ways. Foundation Level had explicit results in terms of the measurements from Accelerated Reader. Of seven students who took part, four had improved their Reading Age, and the class average rose marginally.

Of particular interest was their Student Growth Percentile (SGP), measuring their development against peers who were taking tests at a similar time: three students were placed in the top quartile nationally. The Accelerated Reader results showed up differently for Motor Vehicle: across the three classes, the tests suggested marginal increases and decreases in Reading Age, but again, some growth showed on their Student Growth Percentile.

Students' engagement, according to data gathered via a questionnaire largely showed appreciation of reading as important, as was a quiet reading place. Many students commented that reading had been seen as something to be endured at school so they had derived little pleasure from fiction reading. The type of book they preferred, if any, was comics or image-supported texts.

A number of the low Reading Age, high needs students from Motor Vehicle absented themselves from reading as it came directly after a break-time. This made us think more closely about how best to support their access to the project and is a current topic for discussion.

Several students from the three Motor Vehicle classes expressed a preference for reading on their phones: their views were that texts in the form of hard-copy books were archaic and virtually obsolete, and that reading fiction was unnecessary. Besides, they would prefer to read the news, vocationally oriented texts or simply video media. This was discussed on a case-by-case basis.

Their comments were welcomed and one tutor explained that it was not so much the story or the text that was significant but the critical questioning that happened during reading; this helped to extend a person's thinking beyond their existing frame of experience. The more argumentative the learner, the more sophisticated the response needed.

Learners broadly appreciated the efforts made by the college to support them, as shown in their responses during a focus group meeting. However, some tutors of the vocational area and English still felt that students were often trying to please rather than engage.

**MV Level 3:** *"Why should I read stories? I like watching YouTube videos and listen to podcasts about cars and design. I'd rather spend my time reading things that are going to benefit me."*

**MV Level 2:** *"I used to read when I was in school, and write... I'd forgotten what I like... you don't make time for it do you?"*

Transcribed from focus groups with Motor Vehicle learners

## Learning from this project

Learners who engaged with the project were able, with close English tutor guidance, to use the time and effort being offered them productively. The best means of engaging learners appeared to be discussing their interests with them, finding out their interests and, drawing on their own knowledge of fiction, try and connect thematically with available texts.

Occasionally the most useful strategy was simply to take a text from a shelf, engage the learner with the ideas prompted by the opening sentence and see if that could engage them. Modelling this kind of textual-interrogation gave them encouragement to continue reading and appreciating how such narrative hooks could be useful.

The potential distraction of phones was ever-present, which meant that tutors had to acknowledge the existence of the distraction and then gently encourage students to return to reading. One way was simply to ask a student what text they were reading, ask them questions about why they thought characters behaved as they did, and then leave them to regain their reading momentum independently.

The project should continue to engage students in reading for pleasure reasonably effectively provided the activities offered fit their needs, that is, more graphic texts and perhaps online reading. English tutors and the librarian effectively predicted this, as shown in their summer purchases, and they will continue to invest in texts according to student interest.

Learners are always most engaged when being listened to, so to encourage more effective engagement we might consider either discussing students' choices as shown in the texts they have chosen to read, or perhaps getting some kind of qualitative feedback through their rating and evaluation of texts.

Whereas progress in Reading Age has been limited it is noticeable that the very facilitation of a programme organised around Accelerated Reader has benefitted many learners by rekindling their appreciation for reading fiction.

Encouraging learners to engage in the activities as a test-led exercise was the least effective way of engaging students in the activity; encouraging them to see its benefits as indirectly improving critical thinking influenced a few more so but this happened only after protracted debate.

Accelerated Reader proved to be an excellent tool to track progress but turned out to be challenging when used over a very short period of time. However, feedback can be used to encourage learners to see how their learning is growing: this can readily be seen in their response to quizzes which, when done regularly, brings out their competitive side.

More non-fiction texts and more graphic novels can be added to the stock in order to best engage learners. Furthermore, discussion of texts might be suggested for group-wide interaction and engagement.

# Appendix 1 – Initial questionnaire

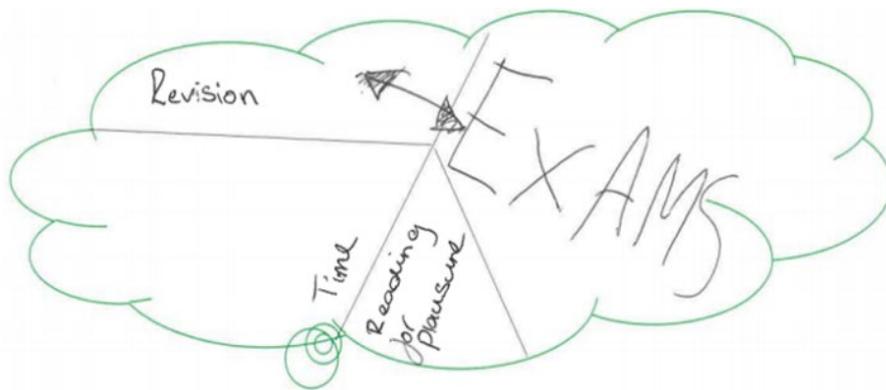
## Typical feedback from the initial questionnaire:

. What do you think is the ideal reading environment? Why?  
You can draw this or write a few sentences about this!

- In a library
- Somewhere quiet
- In your Room.



Typical responses to question: 'What do you typically use reading for?' n.b. 'Time' referred to 'reading for pleasure.'



I only read for pleasure if it's something that i'm interested in.

# Case Studies

## Case Study 1

At the beginning of the project, this student declared that they were aware they reading presently in their VA and also in bed at night before bed. They showed, on the visualised brain, that they felt Revision was most important for learning, followed by Reading for Pleasure, then Exams, then Time.

When asked about their feelings about Reading for Pleasure, they wrote, 'I just found it easier to concentrate on reading, I had to move my phone away as that was a big distraction... I feel relaxed, my brain felt like my brain was working.' They went on to say, 'this world needs colour, you want to get interested in your book and for me its difficult when theres no visible image in the book.' [sic]

This learner greatly enjoyed the Reading for Pleasure time. Having cited Spongebob comics as their favourite reads, which was indicative of their reading age (they tended towards the slim graphic novels we had provided. They showed a growth of Reading Age of 0.01% across the three months and increasing the ZPD range for book choices – going up a colour, which they were motivated by.

The student has since left their main VOC course due to inability to meet its demands. However, this initiative clearly gave them confidence and pleasure in reading and an improved capacity in reading skills.

## Case Study 2

This student was identified by the English tutor early on in the project as a reluctant reader. They were dissociated from the beginning, both from the project and other learners. After having scored relatively highly on the reading age (almost matching their own age) they showed little interest in the books available to them that had been shortlisted so the tutor questioned them about their interests. They initially seemed to show little interest in anything other than gaming on their Xbox but, when questioned about the nature of their enjoyment, showed interests in themes of conflict and displacement via the genres of science fiction and fantasy.

The tutor chose several books from the adult fiction section along these themes and talked through the stories of each one. They chose a Kurt Vonnegut (*Cat's Cradle*) and proceeded through this for the next three weeks. Whereas they admitted an interest in the apocalyptic topic of the text and was happy to discuss the nature of time, they still didn't try and take the book home or engage with it beyond the reading time. This text was the first novel they had read in over five years, having avoided it at high school, choosing to study the exam revision approaches instead.

At the end of the initiative test period this learner and one other was invited to discuss the reading approach. They wanted to engage with the nature of the project, particularly its relevance to their VOC study: 'Why should I read stories? I like watching Youtube videos and listen to podcasts about cars and design. I'd rather spend my time reading things that are going to benefit me.' They then, unsurprisingly, sought to expound upon what was important in life, which offered the tutor an opportunity to guide debate onto the nature of critical thinking. It should be noted that this student had not spoken to this extent since the start of any course at college year, as corroborated by his VOC tutor.

This student benefitted from the time that reading in VOC time offered as they eventually acknowledged that discussing the nature of ideas and how they inform behaviour had illuminated their understanding of processes, primarily social.