

the reading agency

Participate: Creative Reading

Defining 'creative reading'

'Reading is a creative activity in and of itself. It encourages connections and provides stimulus. It links to other types of cultural expression and other art forms. It helps young people to explore the world and enriches them educationally and emotionally'. DEMOS, 2004

Reaching out and choosing a book is the tip of the iceberg. It is the leaping-off point into questions about life, who we are, and what choices we have.

In this document you will find the latest thinking from The Reading Agency on what 'creative reading' means for libraries' work with young people.

So much of the reader's world is invisible. Great decisions are made, promises are voiced, wisdom is glimpsed, and hearts are broken. Isolated, it is only when readers communicate their experience that it is noticed. Part of the work of modern libraries is to make those stabs at connection visible through simple one-to-one recommendations, for example, "*This book is likely to appeal to all those who think true love is possible – if only men would see sense*".

Libraries also make connections by providing opportunities for social engagement (such as through reading groups); proactively amplifying reading discussions across the country (for example World Book Day), whilst never ignoring the continual critical chatter that goes on between readers naturally.

'Creative reading activity particularly in libraries has been able to affect major change in a short space of time. Reading is emerging with the status of a powerful creative activity that is both private and shared; public libraries as key delivery agents for the reading experience. Interestingly, the value of both is also rising in relation to what they can offer a range of partners both inside and outside the cultural sector.' Debbie Hicks, The Reading Agency

Giving young people a creative role in stock selection, enabling them to make connections between their interests and reading, giving them the space to grow and discover themselves as readers; are a major part of supporting a greater involvement with reading and how it touches readers.

"I got involved with HeadSpace Folkestone a couple of months ago. I thought it sounded good that there would be more computers available, and that we would be able to choose books that we liked. We suggested things and our ideas were listened to so we have more manga,

and I really like the fantasy and sci-fi books." Rachel Tubby, young person, HeadSpace Folkestone

So there is no doubt that activities that go on around reading can be labelled 'creative' - but there is still lingering doubt that reading itself is not creative.

Maybe it's the word itself? When they hear it people tend to think of the end results: paintings, music, sculpture, design, and of course books. Where do reading and public libraries fit in here?

Reading, creativity, and achievement

"Being more enthusiastic about reading and a frequent reader was more of an advantage than having well educated parents." PIRLS Report, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, July 2003

We know that being a keen reader aids educational achievement and social mobility but how are young people to reach that point which goes way beyond the ability to read what's on the page?

"Creative or innovative thinking is the kind of thinking that leads to new insights, novel approaches, fresh perspectives, whole new ways of understanding and conceiving of things. The products of creative thought include some obvious things like music, poetry, dance, dramatic literature, inventions, and technical innovations. But there are some not so obvious examples as well, such as ways of putting a question that expand the horizons of possible solutions, or ways of conceiving of relationships that challenge presuppositions and lead one to see the world in imaginative and different ways." Peter Facione, Santa Clara University

Public Libraries are developing innovative ways to reach new and existing readers to make their reading experience better. They are using new approaches to display and promotional work, changing the physical lay-out of the library to make it more receptive to young people, and incorporating creative digital offers (for example www.groupting.org) in their work with young people. They are investing in young people and allowing them some control over the space (for example HeadSpace).

To keep young people involved and interested, we have to bring creativity into our work. In educational terms, a key finding is that pupils leap ahead when they have the chance to think and be creative. They thrive on questioning, on connecting their learning with their experiences and building on what they already know. Where pupils have the chance to share their thinking, reflect on what they are doing, get feedback and develop critical thinking skills, the quality of their work soars.

The National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education defines creativity as ‘imaginative activity fashioned so as to produce outcomes that are both original and of value’.¹ So is all reading creative? Should there be some quality control? Is all reading equal?

The Characteristics of Creativity

The characteristics of creativity: “always involve thinking or behaving **imaginatively**. Second, overall this imaginative activity is **purposeful**: that is, it is directed to achieving an objective. Third, these processes must generate something **original**. Fourth, the outcome must be of **value** in relation to the objective. Creative thinking for example is often used to generate new ways of looking at old problems/situations. This fulfills the first two steps quite obviously, the third is new thinking around the situation, and this would of course have value. Using this definition of creativity fits reading better than those whose products are destined for the gallery or bookshop”. All our futures: Creativity, Culture and Education, National Advisory Committee's report, (DfEE, 1999)

This way of breaking down creativity makes it easier to generate discussions with young people. How would that work with creative reading?

The central point is that it is the reader’s response that dictates the creativity not what they have read. In that sense it doesn’t matter if it’s *Crime and Punishment* or *Gossip Girl*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, or *Takeabreak*. It is all about the response it provokes in the reader.

“If reading doesn’t affect our lives, doesn’t change us or influence our behavior, it is no more than a pass-time”.

Aidan Chambers

Case study: Heroes

A group of young offenders (HMP Reading) discussed who was a hero to them. At first both prison and education staff were wary of allowing them too much freedom. “They’ll just talk about the Krays and other criminals,” they said.

The young men did indeed at first list the Krays etc as heroes, but also Superman, Batman, and others. Extracts from books such as *The Mammoth Book of Heroes* were read to them/with them and gradually the group began to debate what a hero actually was, and what made them different from ‘ordinary’ people. At this point the group lost interest in their favourite criminals, superheroes, and anti heroes.

They talked for a long time about how people in the Second World War must have been heroes as they fought a great enemy, but were then horrified to find out that the soldiers had been paid. Eventually, their definition of a hero, after a great deal of discussion of historical examples, came down to a person who helps another for no reward.

¹ DEMOS, 2004

This example illustrates the way a group can think creatively around what they've read to achieve an objective that they recognize has value to them. The key is supporting the group to find their own way.

Exercise: ALT. Cover

Another way of bringing creativity to reading is to ask a group of young people to design alternative covers for books they've read. This could be a novel famous or otherwise, non-fiction or short stories that people take the time to read before the session begins. More than anything this is about understanding what you've read and how you could communicate that visually to an audience. This could be by searching the library or Internet for a suitable image, or creating one with a digital camera, however it is done it needs to be able to express what the reader felt about the book. They need to be able to bring something new to the understanding of the book. These images can then form the part of a small exhibition either online or in the library.