

How can collaborative reading techniques impact confidence and belonging?

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Presentation abstract

Recent barriers to engagement in higher education (HE) – including economic, geographic and post-Covid-19 anxiety (Dickinson, 2022; Morgan, 2022; Bennett et al., 2022) – may result in students being less inclined to develop relationships with their peers, share ideas, and invest time in their learning. This challenges our efforts to develop students' academic skills as they are transitioning into and through HE.

Academic reading is often neglected in favour of academic writing, largely due to the assumption that competence in reading is an existing skill (Kimberley and Thursby, 2020). However, students report that they lack confidence, resulting in avoidance of reading complex texts (St. Clair-Thompson, Graham and Marsham, 2018). In addition, subject lecturers may not refer to the importance of reading in their teaching. This 'invisibility' (Baker et al., 2019) can lead to a devaluation of the skill, which has serious consequences: reading remains a critical foundation for much thinking and writing in HE (Maguire, Reynolds and Delahunt, 2020).

Collaborative reading techniques can address these challenges by promoting reading as social practice, improving confidence to tackle texts, and boosting belonging within a cohort and discipline (McCollum et al., 2017). At UWE Bristol, we have a two-year project within Learning Services to promote and improve reading skills, including reading within

the disciplines. During 2022, we piloted academic reading circles, textmapping and jigsaw reading. Since then, we have embedded some of these activities across all three colleges at module level.

Initial student and lecturer feedback has been positive, with participants reporting increased levels of confidence. However, is this a sufficient indication of potential long-term impact? How do learning developers influence an improvement of competence and confidence in reading, and move towards a more mature model of embeddedness (Wingate, 2016)? Our presentation explored possible answers to this question by presenting case studies and sharing the lessons learnt.

Keywords: belonging; collaborative; confidence; impact; reading techniques.

Community response

The below responses were provided by members of the community who attended this conference presentation.

Thanks for a great session – Thanks for a fantastic session!

This was a useful session as I do not think we do enough work on making academic texts approachable to students. In my experience, all students struggle with this, not just those from widening participation and non-traditional backgrounds, who are often the focus of research in this area. Reading has been on my mind for a while and you have really helped to crystallise a few things.

I was interested to learn more about collaborative reading practices which is an area I have less experience in. It is also an area I have found students generally tend to overlook as a skill at all, which is very much in line with the findings of UWE Bristol and further research. The session illustrated clear examples of reading being embedded in the curriculum, through Academic Reading Circles (ARC) and the reading templates task which is great. The introduction to the various collaborative reading techniques was helpful and the sharing of practice gave me ideas about how we could initiate similar ways of working. At our institution, we struggle as

learning developers to have more than one-shot interventions and seeing how the ARCs could be adapted to this was helpful. I will also look more at the other types of intervention. I see jigsaw reading working well as activities in peer-led sessions such as PASS for example. The way the reading templates were coupled with assessment clearly moves more towards 'integration'. From experience, I find that sometimes this extreme 'alignment' with assessment saps the joy and creativity out of tasks. Have you found there to be a negative side effect here, whereby it becomes tick box/formulaic? Have you found ways to mitigate this? Also, how can you 'assess' the reflective element here?

I am familiar with a number of collaborative reading strategies, however this session introduced me to some more, and has made me reflect on the qualities of effective collaborative reading tasks. I've never come across ARCs before, but I can now see strong value in this approach to collaborative reading and am really look forward to trying it out. In my experience I find any structures that give learners 'roles' (e.g., de Bono's six thinking hats) very valuable in supporting participants to think creatively, and explore ideas from different perspectives. Having a distinct 'role' to perform in a group often frees learners from worrying about comparing their contributions with those of others and brings about a strong sense of collaboration, confidence and community. Maybe the concept of 'roles' in community building and belonging could be a theme for further exploration for the presenters. Given that it was initially designed for English as a Foreign Language learners, I wonder which of the roles work best in different disciplines or learning contexts, and which adaptations or new, alternative 'roles' might enhance the process. Maybe discussing how to adapt roles could be one further way to involve academics and students in planning ARC sessions.

In the online session there was a discussion around how to select a good text. I think this gets to the heart of the issue with reading and highlights the challenge and importance of extensive collaboration and team teaching with the course team; texts, topics, the themes of discussions and the ways of reading have to all really speak to the learning outcomes of the module and course.

I agree that reading does not always get the attention it deserves. It is much more involved than just finding and referencing a source. Having the confidence and

understanding to know how to access the source, make sense of it in a meaningful way, paraphrase and apply it to practice/argument, is incredibly important. So much content being online can also contribute to challenges of reading. I come across a number of students who do not see themselves as 'confident/academic readers' but more so as practitioners who would much prefer to have access to physical resources to read, rather than having everything online. I wonder if that is maybe part of why students respond so positively to text mapping when it uses physical resources – that they are interacting with a physical resource in a physical space with other people and the text comes to life. I love the comment in the Padlet about the tutor who stripped out the content to replace it with shared reading activities. Giving space to students to share what they are thinking about their reading and how to make connections between the reading and module learning/learning outcomes – a real community of learning.

I'm really interested in how reading circles and equivalents foster belonging and increase confidence but this can be really difficult to measure. We ask students questions about whether they have developed confidence in applying certain skills as a result of a journal club and, although we don't use the term belonging, we do ask about connecting with others. I think it is really important to capture these elements of 'impact' and not just whether interventions improve performance.

I often think many 'writing' problems are reading problems and we should teach reading more – I had never thought about it as an aspect of belonging. Thinking about it, I think this is a valid point – to belong to a discourse community means conversing with it, and it makes a huge difference, whether these are conversations with people through paper that only take place in your head or whether we can bring these conversations into the room (literally). I often remind students that most academic papers are written for an audience of other professional academics – not undergraduates taking their first steps into the field and that it is perfectly normal to find them challenging. Linking these struggles to the concept of belonging is new to me but makes perfect sense – the 'imposter syndrome' suffered by many is very isolating and collaborative reading, which normalises the difficulties in approaching a text, is a fabulous antidote.

Authors' reflection

It was interesting to see learning developer (LD) colleagues making the connection between collaborative reading techniques and belonging in an HE community for the first time. This may depend on the type of HE institution in which colleagues work, the academic level of the students there, the subject areas colleagues support, and the types of degrees offered. We 'saw' this connection when working on reading with students doing a vocational programme of study, where they are out of university and on the job for long periods of time. These students are more likely to feel that they do not belong in higher education. Normalising the emotion – often negative – around reading, and offering coloured overlays to support reading, was clearly important to these students. This seemed to lower their affective barriers, resulting in better-than-expected engagement and openness to new ways of working.

Measuring the impact of LD is a thorny issue, but qualitative feedback is as powerful as quantitative: asking students to comment on post-its/anonymously online is valuable as a reaction. However, we acknowledge that measuring the longer-term impact on students' reading practice is difficult. This is where the LDer's relationship with the academic is key: have the academics noticed a greater confidence in their students' use of resources?

The role cards for Academic Reading Circles (ARCs) are super-flexible and can be tailored to any programme. The suggestion to consult with the subject academic about which roles to use is excellent and we'll take that on board, particularly in programmes where we have more than one intervention. We haven't yet found there to be an issue with linking an ARC role to the assessment in that module, but we take the point that it could take the creativity out of discussing the text.

The connection to group roles and the six thinking hats was helpful and food for thought. While there is only a partial overlap with the current ARC roles, the emotive aspects of De Bono's schema may inform the way that we develop our reading strategies as a means to foster belonging. This contributors' comments therefore also teased out our 'positive' thinking more with respect to some reflection upon the role of roles! We certainly agree with the observation that allocating roles shifts the student dynamic to a collaborative approach. It removes the anxiety of uncertainty about what to do, and helps to lessen the

element of competition involved in directly comparing work in favour of a more complementary relationship.

Including Peer-Assisted Learning (PAL) leaders in running collaborative reading sessions in the programmes is a fabulous idea which we have already discussed with our PAL Manager!

Thank you also to those colleagues who shared some insights into the successes and challenges experienced in reading sessions through our Padlet. These included text-mapping, the use of fairy tales, and an interdisciplinary journal club. We will keep exploring and experimenting, and will be happy to exchange further ideas.

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