

The Reading Club Format for Reading Class at the University Level (1st Year Students)

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The Reading Club Format for Reading Class at the University Level (1st Year Students)

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In this paper I would like to discuss the Reading Club Format I have used in my freshman classes for about the last 6 or 7 years. The reading club format in university classes serves many purposes. In contrast to reading for information, this style has students working on various levels. This paper will discuss these levels such as theme, background, time and place, language and often touches on the writers' lives. I would also like to discuss the skills students develop using this method.

● The challenge of choosing materials

One of the first challenges is choosing appropriate material. Some of the readers, for example, love stories, stories of friendships or hardships, make it easier for students to identify with either the stories or characters. They can engage in discussions using their own lives as background experience to relate to the story. Some examples I have used are "Four Weddings and a Funeral" –by Richard Curtis, retold by Cherry Gilchrist
"Emma" –by Jane Austen, retold by Annette Barnes.

In a completely different direction, if police procedurals, courtroom dramas or action stories are chosen, they can have the effect of engaging the students' imagination. Some examples in the past are:

"A Time to Kill" –by John Grisham, retold by Christopher Tribble

"The Firm" –by John Grisham, retold by Robin Waterfield

"The Talented Mr. Ripley" –by Patricia Highsmith, retold by Kevin Hinkle

Sometimes we will read a mystery and Agatha Christie seems to be one of the most popular and prolific authors.

Some examples are:

"Murder on the Orient Express" –by Agatha Christie

"The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side" –by Agatha Christie

"The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes" –by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, retold by David Maule

There is also the problem of choosing material that is neither too easy nor too difficult. Fortunately, both Longman's Penguin Readers and Oxford Bookworms have levels for specific TOEIC and TOEFL score averages. For my freshman reading classes I have chosen level 4 for the first semester and level 5 for the second semester.

As a reminder to the reader of this paper, the format is neither literary criticism nor book

report style but weekly discussions about the characters, the stories and the situations in which the characters find themselves. Both Penguin Readers and Oxford Bookworms have condensed forms of a variety of novels from the classics to best sellers. These readers are sometimes rather short yet the weekly in-depth discussions make these readers about the right length for a semester of work.

● **Class Time Arrangement**

Next, I would like to discuss the class time arrangement. Each week there is a reading homework assignment. The assignment is usually one chapter from the chosen reader. The students should come to class having completed the week's assignment. Everyone in the class reads the same chapter during the same week. This is especially important when we are reading mysteries. The following week about one third to one half of the class time is dedicated to a review of the homework, vocabulary words and their understanding of the characters and/or situations. The remainder of the class is given over to discussions. The discussions are a result of questions posed by the lecturer. These questions can take the form of queries about the motivation for characters, the reason for the actions/situation and the students interpretation of these events. The students keep notebooks with a breakdown of the characters, major happenings and notes from the discussions.

● **Notebooks**

Here I would like to give an explanation of the notebooks the students use. They can use any size and if the notebooks are pocket size then one page is devoted to each major character. If the notebooks are A4 size, half a page is given to the major characters. The students keep notes (they do not have to use paragraphs or even use complete sentences) about the characters. For example, "What are the characters like? Their personality traits, their habits and beliefs if known. How do they interact with the other characters?" They also jot down their opinions/feelings about the characters in the story. One of the interesting results is their opinions or feelings about certain people in the story may change as the story and discussions progress. The students have a record of the how, when and why some of these changes have happened.

Also included in these notebooks are any major developments in the story and the effects on the characters. The notebooks provide an easy way to update characters under the heading for each person in the story. For example, in the case of a story about love/friendship/hardship they may be able to draw on their own experiences or the experiences of those close to them and add to the discussion and to their notebooks.

● **The Lecturer's Role**

What is the lecturer's role during the discussion period? The lecturer moves from group to

group to ensure that students are on task. Lecturers can also show their own thinking processes, yet sometimes this can result in the students thinking that their teacher's opinion must be the "right answer" and that can sometimes be a problem. The lecturer must take care not to talk too much during this time unless it is to clarify some event in the story, point out a character flaw or the use of vocabulary words. Sometimes when the lecturer gives an opinion and shows supporting arguments for that opinion it gives the students an example of how to support or defend their own opinions.

● Skills Learned through this technique

This brings us to the skills learned through this kind of discussion group. Supporting and defending their opinions. It is not enough to just have an opinion but to be able to give reasons why, in other words their thought processes.

Two more important skills are guessing and predicting. In the usual testing environment such as that in Japan, it is difficult to get the students to guess. Predicting is a little easier as they can draw on certain aspects of the story, characters or plot line to predict. For example, in the very first class of a mystery book I ask students to guess who might be the victim or the perpetrator based solely on the cover of the book. Merely taking a chance and throwing out an answer is a difficult task for them. They usually cannot. What if it is not the right answer? Silence. Predicting, on the other hand, is usually done well into the story and the students can point to certain clues to support their predictions. In either case, they are most often surprised at what their original answer was and what eventually happens in the story and this can lead to lively discussions. Agatha Christie novels are especially good for developing these skills as she is famous for the red herrings in her stories. Action/police procedurals or courtroom dramas work very well as human nature is often unpredictable when characters are forced into a corner within the storyline. As the students get used to guessing and predicting they learn that actually thinking about the people and the situations in the stories becomes interesting and, yes I may say, fun.

Another skill is connecting. So often the students are at a loss to see how their reading materials connect to them in some way. As I have mentioned previously, they can draw on experience and look at ways the stories or people connect in their lives. Maybe one of the characters is just like their friend or relative. Certain situations may have occurred to them or someone they know or someone they are related to. What did that person do in real life? How is the person they know like the character in the book? How are they different? How was the situation in the story similar to one that happened to someone they know, are related to or even themselves? Seeing connections to real life events or real people makes the story more interesting. Seeing those connections makes them start to understand or at least look at human behavior with all its goodness, foibles, sometimes evils and sometimes mishaps.

Questioning is another skill that can be learned with this style of reading class. Questioning

whether human nature is really such, whether these kinds of situations really happen. Questioning themselves on long-held opinions and sometimes exactly why they have held on so tight and maybe change or keep those feelings. The fact that they question themselves, each other and even the lecturer shows that they are growing and learning about life and the world outside.

One of the great outcomes of learning these skills is that the students not only develop analytical skills but social skills as well. The groups are kept to between four to six students and the discussions are taking place simultaneously therefore, no student really sticks out in the class and the shy students can have the opportunity to develop friendships in their groups and venture their opinions in a safe environment. One of the teacher evaluation feedback messages received from students in the reading classes is they really like group work but during the first part of the class - review of the homework - most of them preferred to be called on in class so that they would not feel pressured to just speak out on their own. As the semester progresses, I notice that they begin to shout out more and more often and do not feel the need to be called on to answer. Another plus is that the students develop more confidence and no longer feel the need to look around the room to see if they are in the majority when they express their opinions. They have an idea or opinion and feel confident to express it.

I also search the internet for fun and games when it comes time for review. One of the most popular games is from one of the TOEFL sites called PHD Bingo. I have adapted the game to vocabulary words from the reader. By this time, the students are ready to shout out vocabulary words which I (sometimes frantically to keep up) write on the board. We talk about how these words fit into the story. Then they all receive a blank bingo card and write the vocabulary words in a square on the card. Then the lecturer chooses words or phrases and everyone marks their card. The first one to call "bingo" gets the first choice of a prize - actually all participants receive a prize. It may be a small bookmark (50 to a package) a pencil or eraser. Everyone wins because they have not only completed the game but completed the book selection

● Testing

The final test is somewhat different than usual tests. The students are allowed to bring the reader and their notes to the test. The reason for this is they can look up any character or situation at any time during the test. This takes the pressure away from any memorization. I usually prepare three questions and the student must choose only one of the questions to answer. Some examples of questions from last semester – “ The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side” are: 1. Marina died from an overdose of sleeping pills. Miss Marple thinks Jason, Marina's husband, may have given them to her. Jason says that Marina took them herself. At the end of the story it remains unclear what happened. What do you think happened? Please explain your answer. 2. Did you enjoy this book? Would you recommend it to a friend? What would you say about this book? Are you interested in reading any other Agatha

Christie novels? Why or why not? 3. Which did you like better, the movie or the book? There were some differences between the movie and the book—for example some characters were omitted from the movie as well as some places. Did any of these omissions make a difference in the story? Why or why not?

As you can see, there would be no “cheating” involved in using the book or the notebooks. The students may use them to verify certain points about the characters but the basic answer would be their own thoughts on the questions. If the student had not attended class and not taken part in the discussions then the questions would be very difficult to answer. But, if the student had attended class, shared and supported their opinions and listened to the support of the opinions of others, then the books and notebooks are merely tools to help the student answer the questions.

● Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to restate how many skills the students can develop using this method. Guessing, predicting, connecting and the ability to support an opinion in addition to social skills are some of the lessons learned in such an environment. Recently Oxford Bookworms has published a series called Bookworms Club Reading Circles. There is a lot of photocopying and assigning of tasks each week that, for me, distracts from the prime purpose of reading for learning and sharing. I have looked at it and I like it but for now I am going to continue using this method as it has served as a template for lively classes and provided the impetus for some of the students to go out and get the complete novel or a novel by the same author and give it a try. The Reading Club Format for Reading Class is not an end in itself. It serves as a springboard for many students to go out and buy, borrow or rent something they are pretty sure they will enjoy. This is meant to be the start of a journey towards reading for pleasure and sharing.