

I know what you read last summer

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Book reviews get students more involved in assemblies – and enjoying their reading.

Literacy levels provide our main challenge. This is in large part because St George's Academy is in Lincolnshire, where the grammar school system still operates and the 11+ test seems to be far more effective in pre-selecting on a child's ability in literacy than in numeracy.

The effects of low literacy levels not only on English outcomes but also on the children's ability to access other key areas of the curriculum underline the need to take all available steps to improve our students' ability to read and write fluently. The school uses several approaches to improve literacy, such as: the Accelerated Reader programme for the whole of year 7 and low ability sets in years 8-9; Read Write Inc Fresh Start programme for students in Y7 who struggle with the pronunciation of phonics and blending; TRUGS cards, which are being introduced throughout the school to increase the level of vocabulary used; and a weekly word focus looking at specific command words during form time.

Leading by example

A couple of years ago I saw an inspirational presentation by Graham Tyrer, then head of Chenderit School near Banbury, on his quest to raise standards of literacy in his own school. He led by example, maintaining that assembly is the first lesson of the day: he was determined that the students would learn something in each assembly, whether it was the importance of the semi-colon or another literacy themed learning outcome.



I left convinced that I was not making the most of the learning opportunities in my assemblies. What I needed was a big idea. It came from a discussion with my daughter who, as a newly trained teacher of English, was filming student responses and playing them back in her lessons. I thought that I could scale that up for my assemblies to 600 year 7 and 8 students on a Friday morning. I also thought the message would be made more powerful because it would be coming from someone who is male, and a maths teacher, rather than an English teacher.

He was determined that the students would learn something (about literacy) in each assembly

Students interview others about books they have read

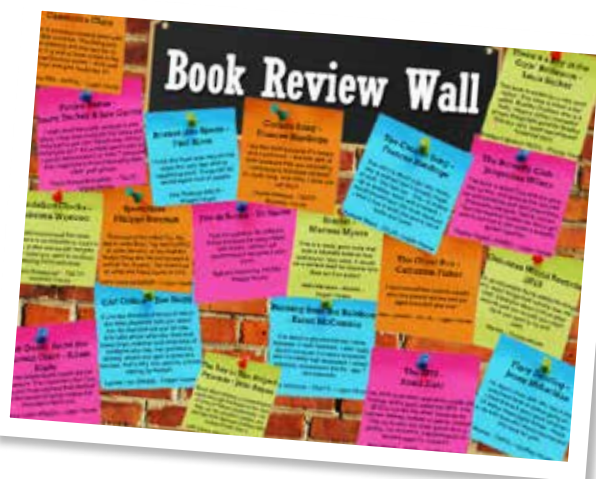
I would film them being interviewed about a book they have just read, and then show the resulting film in assembly, basing the assembly's learning objectives on literacy points chosen according to the book being reviewed.



It was launched in the autumn term under the working title, 'I know what you read last summer'. I started in a limited fashion, leading the way myself by reviewing a book I had read that summer. I then asked for three volunteers from Y8. Hannah, Izzy and Melek were the first to come forward and I booked the TV studio and our excellent IT technician, Karl, to do the first recordings. Hannah would interview me, then it was Hannah's turn in the hot seat, interviewed by Izzy and then Izzy would review her book, interviewed by Melek. That's how we set up our chain which, during the course of the year, led to the filming of 16 book reviews, each of which was the focus of an assembly.

The questions were pre-set so that the students could prepare for their interview. Karl sorted the green screen, managed the filming and even sorted autocue for those who came prepared with a script. He edited the films, superimposing pictures of the books as well as a few other quirky extras including some extra sounds and visuals. The editing was taking too long so he came up with a template into which he could 'drop' the scenes. At that point we removed the interviewer from the review, which was sad but I don't think Karl could have kept up with the extra editing on top of all the other jobs he has to do.

The Friday assemblies were fun. Students felt they were taking the lead. It was them projected onto the big screen. It was them doing the talking. All I had to do was bring it all together at the end with a bit of humour thrown in, read a passage from the book which had been reviewed and talk to them about the literacy learning point which was exemplified in the passage.



Mr Crawshaw's Literacy Learning Point

"I'm a grenade and at some point I'm going to blow up and I would like to minimise the casualties, okay?"

The person speaking is clearly not a grenade. However, we understand exactly what is meant.

This is an example of a

metaphor

No restrictions were made on the books that the students could review. My heart sank a little when one of the books was filled with sketchy drawings and was written in a very informal style. That assembly on *Dork Diaries – Holiday Heartbreak* by Rachel Renee Russell was one of the best, though. I was able to get across the importance of reading; reading for enjoyment encourages you to read more. Read anything... just read. It also gave me the chance to set myself up humorously as someone 'out of his time', who does not really understand what writing like this is all about.

On the other hand there were classics chosen, like *Of Mice and Men*, which gave me the chance to explain that books that have stood the test of time, and have been read by generation after generation of children, are probably worth checking out.

After the assembly the videos of the reviews were posted on the academy website. Some of them came with a PowerPoint presentation of 'Mr Crawshaw's literacy learning point'.

Feedback from the students was tremendous. I would regularly have Y7 and Y8 students come up to me to tell me how much they enjoy the assemblies. I still do, despite the fact that this year (year 2 of the book review initiative) we have not yet filmed or shown any more book reviews.

Students' reviews displayed in library

Why not? Well, we will, but I wanted to extend the involvement from 16 assemblies last year to mass participation this year. Inspired by the short recommendations written on little cards in bookshops like Waterstones, I decided to invite students to get involved by writing a short review of a book they have read onto a card, which we would display in one of the libraries.

In addition, the cards would be colour-coded by 'house' so that the rewards they were earning by submitting a book review (2 house points



per review) would count towards the house competition. Further still, if their review is selected by the librarians to be used in a display, they gain two additional house points.

I have not even mentioned the Book Review Wall on the website. All reviews are typed up onto virtual Post-it notes and 'pinned' to a virtual wall in the book review section of the website. This work is done by another IT technician, Emily, who has designed and maintains the website 'window' to the reviews. We have two walls on the go at any one time. The current wall is being filled by the most recent reviews. There is another wall full of slightly older reviews. We hope that the time-limited presentation of the reviews

will resonate with the Snapchat/Instagram-savvy 11-13 year olds at whom this is primarily aimed. Already, just a few weeks in, over 30 students have written and submitted a review. Several are on display in the library.

Many more students have reviewed books this year, which means not only that I have more to choose from when planning my literacy assemblies, but also that more students are getting involved. I look forward to reviewing the impact at the end of this year and getting students involved in deciding how we can make it better.