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Promoting reading in a secondary school: Don Valley School and Performing Arts College

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Brief description

This school has focused determinedly on efforts to improve students' attitudes to reading to enhance their progress in English and their literacy skills across other areas of the curriculum. Much of this work centres around library projects, but the school has also sought to develop enjoyment of reading within the English curriculum as well as promoting a wide range of reading initiatives across the curriculum.

Overview – the school's message

'Like many schools, Don Valley faces the significant challenge of developing a love of reading and a passion for English in its broadest sense – in a fast-developing technological world where mp3 players, texting and 'speed data' can appear to be the order of the day. Rather than compete, we have sought to engage our students through a variety of active strategies. Our students are from largely disadvantaged backgrounds but, like all children, they have a passion for the imagined reality of a well-plotted, carefully crafted text. Our over-riding aim has been to provide as many varied opportunities as possible for all our learners to engage with language and to develop a confidence with, and love of, reading that will last a lifetime.'

Noreen D'Rozario, Headteacher

The good practice in detail

The school's assessments show that standards in reading are low when students arrive. Two thirds of all students in Year 7 were assessed as having a reading age below their chronological age. Standards in English remain below average at the end of Key Stage 4. The senior leadership of the school is fully committed to improving reading and raising standards of literacy.

Don Valley was the National Literacy Trust's Reading Connects school of the year in 2010. This reflects a number of factors. Many schools have highly motivated and influential

librarians. What makes Don Valley different is the strong commitment to improving reading and the integration of activities that draw together the English department, the work of the librarian, and opportunities for promoting reading in other areas of the curriculum and outside school. These strategies include working closely with parents and carers to engage their support in promoting reading and identifying poor readers early on. Additional help is well planned through targeted small group activities that focus on the enjoyment of complete texts as well as developing students' reading skills. The school improvement plan places reading at the centre of its efforts to raise standards. The approach taken is systematic, multi-layered and diverse. The school's view is that all teachers and departments should be involved in the programme. For example, an initial step to raise the profile of reading involved members of staff and students displayed on large, glossy posters around the school reading some unexpected choices of book. These are also shown on the monitor in the entrance foyer.

Not surprisingly, the school library is at the centre of many of the initiatives to promote reading. The dedicated and knowledgeable librarian is encouraged by senior leaders to promote a wide range of initiatives, often working in partnership with local primary schools and other secondary schools in the north of Doncaster. She works hard to make the library a welcoming environment. She links library themes and competitions with students' daily lives, topics being studied and outside interests. Student photographs and comments are prominently displayed and students themselves are involved in promoting reading for pleasure. They are provided with regular information about new titles through book



magazines and websites. The librarian also promotes and organises many initiatives aimed at developing a love of reading. A list of activities planned for the autumn term 2010 gives some indication of the rich diet available for students. It included:

- a visit by author, Ali Sparkes, to work with Year 7 students
- Doncaster Book Award launch at the Civic Theatre, involving students and writers
- a half-day drama workshop on the theme of Halloween with an outside presenter
- a joint drama/history workshop to commemorate Remembrance Day
- two full-day drama workshops based on the Doncaster Book Award and involving the school's reading group and primary school pupils
- a visit by students to a local secondary school to hear a talk from one of the writers of the 'Dr Who' television series
- a party for the reading group to give away books and celebrate their work during the year.

The school has worked increasingly closely with students in recent years to promote reading. For example, there has long been a policy of individual reading within form time, making use of book boxes organised by the librarian. To improve the impact of this session, the school decided to involve the students more directly, so a group of Year 10 boys was provided with an 'Apprentice-style' challenge. They were given a day and a half to find ways of promoting reading for pleasure among other students. They then presented their ideas at a special event to an audience of governors, staff, parents and carers and other students. This led to

a proposal for a football-themed scheme called 'Take a shot at IT'. This now involves all students in Years 7 to 11 in reading and reviewing books and posting their reviews through a league table. Forms compete with each other to become 'top scorer' and 'premier league' reviewers.

The reading group, organised by the librarian, has been particularly successful and draws in many keen and able readers. Students meet weekly to read, discuss and review a wide range of texts. The group is popular with an average attendance of well over 20 throughout the year. Each session includes an activity and students are encouraged to read all sorts of



books. This leads to the publication of reviews around the library as the school is well aware of the importance of peer recommendations. Students from the group help promote the library and choose reading materials. This year, they also volunteered to do a presentation during assemblies to promote reading. Their commitment to reading is unquestionable. In discussion, students spoke of how reading was like being 'in a whole new world where you can close yourself off from everything else' and how it is 'like having a little TV in the back of your mind'. In turn, these

students become heavily involved with the local Book Award programme as well as initiatives to shadow national book awards, including the Carnegie Award.

However, the promotion of reading extends far beyond the school library. The school promotes a wide range of cross-curricular reading events. Links with the performing arts are especially strong. In addition to the drama and history activities mentioned above, the drama teachers ensure that students read texts in their lessons and respond to them in a creative and interactive way. Links with history are especially well developed and texts are chosen in English and reading groups that match the topics studied in history. Links with parents and carers are also highly developed. A joint parent/child reading group was launched, attended by a local author who spoke of the importance of parents and carers encouraging their children to read. Family Review days are held in the library, giving parents and carers the opportunity to talk about books with the librarian and with students. Lists of recommended reads are sent home and the school has also produced a leaflet on reading for parents and carers, with tips and hints on supporting your child's reading.



One recent initiative involved an additional weekly lesson on the timetable for all Year 7 students, taught by members of the senior leadership team on the novel *Frozen in Time* by Ali Sparkes. The school arranged for the author herself to visit and talk to students about her book. The intention behind the initiative was to ensure that all students had experience of reading a complete text in addition to their reading within regular English lessons.

Reading tests identify a large number of students who need extra help with their reading. Two particular programmes have been introduced to help them make better progress. The weakest readers receive additional support through a phonic-based reading programme taught by the Learning Support department. Secondly, the school has developed an

approach based around small groups of guided readers. This session is in addition to timetabled English lessons. The students selected are not the weakest readers but those who read literally and with limited understanding. The school initially identified over 30 students in Year 7 in this category and placed them in small groups of about four. The groups meet weekly to work on a particular text, reading aloud, talking about the book and following the session up with homework activities. The sessions are popular with students who say that they gain greatly in confidence as readers working in these small groups. There are now 14 of these reading groups in operation involving students from Year 7 to Year 9. The texts read by the groups are good quality contemporary texts enjoyed by students such as *Private Peaceful* (to link with work in history) and *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*. Two boys are currently reading the latter text using a hand-held gaming device and this has been found to be a considerable motivator.

The English department fully supports these initiatives and promotes the importance of reading for enjoyment within its curriculum. Early lessons in Year 7 involve students working in the library, using all the resources available, and this builds towards a poetry unit where students select a poem and perform it to their peers in the library. Activities are devised to ensure enjoyment of reading, with lots of emphasis on speaking and listening and active tasks such as making puppets as part of the work on *Romeo and Juliet*. The department has also developed its own approach to guided, group reading in Year 8 where students are involved in choosing the texts. The librarian and other members of staff support this lesson to provide additional expert guidance with the different texts chosen and to reduce the size of the groups. The head of department describes the approach as one where students and teachers become fellow readers exploring the texts together. Another interesting approach has been for all homework in English in the first term in Year 7 to be independent reading by students at home to get the reading habit integrated straight away.

These initiatives on reading run alongside a well-established approach to literacy. The school has always had a literacy coordinator and takes the issue seriously. The current policy focuses with greater urgency on reading. The work is complemented by a whole-school literacy action plan and the work of the literacy coordinator who leads a cross-curricular group of teachers to reinforce good practice in all subjects. The school also tries to help build



the next generation of readers by working closely with feeder primary schools. The librarian visits all the main primary feeder school and one of the activities that the pupils complete is to write a postcard about their favourite books and authors. This is then available, together with all the books mentioned, on display in the library when pupils arrive in Year 7.

Not surprisingly, the school believes that the impact of all this activity to promote reading is positive and is improving standards. Students

speak with great enthusiasm about reading and about many of the activities described above such as the small guided groups, the author visits and the reading group for able readers. Feedback from reading tests suggests that most of the students involved in interventions have made good progress and visits to the library have increased. However, senior leaders acknowledge that much still remains to be done if standards are to rise to the levels expected at the end of Key Stage 4.

The school's background

[Don Valley School and Performing Arts College](#) is a larger than average secondary school. In 2009, it became a foundation trust school supported by a charitable foundation that includes the NHS Doncaster, Cambridge University and Pilot Theatre, York. The pupils are nearly all White British heritage. Approximately 20% are eligible for free school meals and around one in four has been identified as having special educational needs and/or disabilities.

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

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