

Leading a Beanstalk OU/UKLA Reading Group

By: Rebecca Kennedy

Context

As a UKLA member and independent English consultant, I was asked to lead a reading group of Beanstalk reading volunteers based in Birmingham. Beanstalk is a national children's Literacy charity which recruits, trains and supports volunteers to provide one to one Literacy support for primary school children. Volunteers are placed in a school and work with the children throughout the academic year, to improve reading ability, confidence and enjoyment.

Beanstalk has a number of reading support programmes available for different education settings depending on the children's needs and school's aims. I work in several schools across the Midlands and have often seen and talked to reading volunteers, but I knew little about the work that they did with young readers. Leading this Beanstalk OU/UKLA reading group was an opportunity not only to improve my knowledge of Beanstalk and the work the reading volunteers do but to engage with a group of adults who care deeply about young peoples' reading.




OU Research inspiration and rationale

This work built directly upon the TaRs findings that teachers have a limited knowledge of children's literature (Cremin et al. 2014), Beanstalk leaders perceived this was also likely to be a challenge for their volunteers, so groups were set up to widen members' knowledge and support their practice. In this case study I want to share how my colleagues from Beanstalk and I worked with a group of committed reading volunteers: the content of the reading group meetings and how we plan to develop this next year.

Aims

As this work is part of the OU's work to support research informed RfP, group leaders like myself were provided with the following overall aims:

- to foster children's reading for pleasure through supporting teachers' own reading for pleasure and research-informed practice
- to support the profession by building a professional community around reading for pleasure online and off
- to share teachers' resultant development work on the OU reading for pleasure website.

However, as I was working with adult volunteers and not teachers, so a team of us working with Beanstalk, and the OU identified aims more tailored for our reading group, we aimed to:

- develop our knowledge of children's literature
- develop children's confidence as readers
- be part of a reading community.

Outline and impact

My colleague at Beanstalk in Birmingham found a group of reading volunteers who wanted to be involved and four meetings were planned across the academic year: November, March, May and June. Beanstalk reading volunteers commit large amounts of time to working with young readers in school and so this number of meetings was deemed appropriate. Given the aims of the group, the agenda for each of the sessions was based on focused booktalk. Before each session, the group were given the name of a children's text and asked to read this with their young readers in school. The books were chosen by myself and my colleague Amy McKay, who was also running a Beanstalk book group as part of this project (in Corby). The books we chose were high-quality picture books which are suitable for children across the primary age range. These books, the reading volunteers' opinions and the children's responses were discussed as part of our significant book blether in each meeting.

Meeting 1 overview:

- introductions and an overview of the group's aims and purpose
- what it means to be a Beanstalk reading volunteer
- two books you love (children or adult texts) and why: an initial book blether.

The group I worked with were mainly retired professionals, several were teachers, who had worked as Beanstalk volunteers for different lengths of time. They were highly enthusiastic and spoke with passion about the young readers they worked alongside. Initial questionnaires identified that the volunteers needed and indeed wanted to develop their knowledge of new children's books and how to use them. The books the volunteers brought with them (two books they loved) varied greatly. The meeting was warm, lively and a thoroughly positive experience.



Completing initial questionnaires in the Birmingham Beanstalk office: meeting 1

Following the meeting, I emailed the group with website information for booklists and children's book prizes, including the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education, Corebooks list; the UKLA book award; the Kate Greenaway medal; BookTrust's booklists and book finder and provided them with one of the brilliantly useful practical papers from the website (<https://researchrichpedagogies.org/research/theme/teachers-knowledge-of-childrens-literature-and-other-texts>): *Teachers' knowledge of children's literature and other texts Practical classroom strategies*.

Meeting 2 overview:

- a book blether about *Black Dog* by Levi Pinfold
- browsing and sharing new texts: high quality picture books and more complex picture books for older readers.

All of the volunteers had obtained, read and shared *Black Dog* with their readers before the second meeting. The discussion was rich and opinions on the text varied. As the group lead, I was able to direct conversations so that we looked closely at particular images, unpicked aspects of the text and returned to particular meaning making elements such as the book's front matter and end papers.

I had brought a selection of high-quality picture books and more complex picture books for older readers to the meeting and following our book blether, the reading volunteers were invited to browse, read and discuss these books. A considerable length of time was given to this and I was able to observe and discuss books informally while the volunteers browsed. Everyone was very positive about the session and a blueprint for the next meeting had been formed!



Meeting 3 overview:

- a book blether about *Mr Wuffles* by David Weisner
- browsing and sharing new texts: non-fiction picture books and faction books.

During book discussions, the reading volunteers were relaxed and open – opinions on the texts chosen and shared in school varied, as did the children's responses to each of the books. Sharing my own collection of texts and allowing the volunteers to explore them at their own leisure was welcomed. After browsing and discussing my books, some volunteers bought copies to read with young readers in school; some volunteers bought texts for themselves or grandchildren, but each volunteer was widening their knowledge of children's literature and being introduced to new and exciting texts.

Exploring a range of fiction picture books: meeting 2

Meeting 4 overview:

- case studies and reflections.

As the group is part of an ongoing project, the final session was focused on evaluations and reflections. The volunteers completed questionnaires designed to evaluate the impact of the sessions. Responses were very positive. It was clear that volunteers were now choosing different books to read with their young readers; they were more adventurous and confident in sharing these. This was particularly true of the picture books for older readers. At the start, several of the volunteers had noted that the children they worked with disliked reading and some were adamant that reading wasn't for them!

However, building strong relationships with the children; engaging in regular conversations and introducing new and inspiring books to the young readers meant that reading volunteers reflected that the children's confidence had grown, and they were able to recommend more exciting texts to the readers which in turn led to a richer experience for both. As one reading volunteer commented: *'At the end of the third term, when completing her reading record, when I asked what she thought of reading, she replied, 'I love reading now!'*

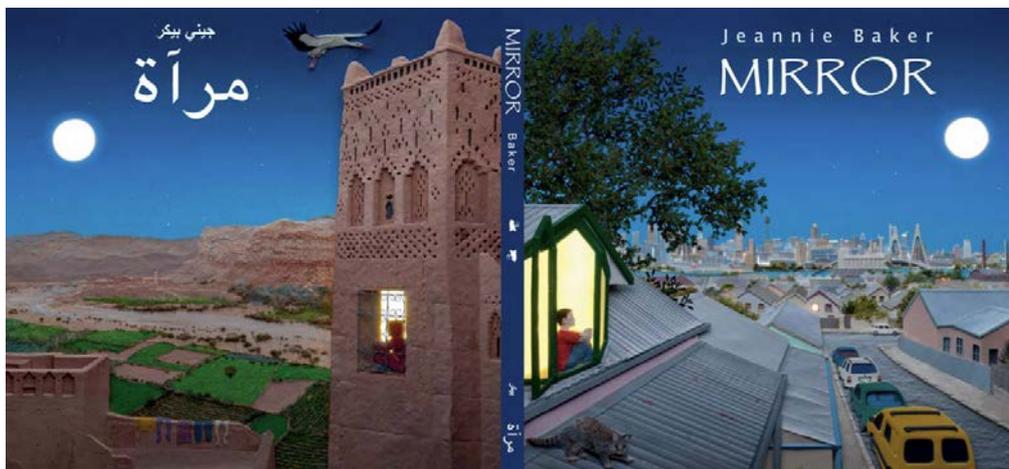
Other responses also demonstrate that the reading volunteers had developed their practice:

'It's encouraged me to be more adventurous in my book selection. After one meeting, I chose It's a Book by Lane Smith. The children loved the voice of Jackass, Mouse and Monkey. The children even preferred the passage taken directly from Treasure Island to the PC translation.'

'When we read The Book with No Pictures we had great fun – we took it in turns to read the black and coloured text; we used different voices and read it many times.'

Personally, I'm thrilled that most of the volunteers have signed up to be part of the same group next year because this demonstrates that they have found it a beneficial and positive experience. Enthusiasm is contagious; the group has grown, and we will be able to cater for more volunteers as part of this in its next phase.

However, four meetings were not enough, so the group will meet six times during the next academic year. We will hit the ground running and the first book blether text, the wonderful wordless picture book, *Mirror* by Jeannie Baker has been set. The volunteers will share this with their readers early in the new year ready to discuss it during the meeting at the end of September. In terms of the meetings themselves, next year the input from myself will be more focused and I hope to support the group to improve their subject knowledge of books. For example, I am planning on exploring elements of multimodality, text structure and look at specific themes and genres in more detail. These discussions will be designed to develop the group's confidence and knowledge of children's texts, book conventions and the craft of designing and composing children's texts.



Wordless picture book, Mirror by Jeannie Baker: the next text to be discussed

Reflections on impact the TaRs research had on practice

'Knowledge of children's literature and of individual children and their reading interests is essential in order to develop young readers who can and do choose to read for pleasure...focused advice not only widens reading repertoires but increases the chances of young readers finding reading relevant.' (Cremin et al., 2014: 35)

Our reading group will retain the same aims for its second year. As group leader, I would like to help the group to develop subject and pedagogical content knowledge in relation to children's literature by exploring three interlinked domains described by Cremin et al. in 2014:

- *'Knowledge of appropriate books, authors and poets;*
- *Understanding how and when to use these texts in the classroom, for example, reading aloud... recommending to individual children...*
- *Understanding children's development as readers both in and out of school and how home, culture, personal interests and community influence reading practices.'* (Cremin et al., 2014:36)

I intend to extend the range of texts I introduce and explore with the group, for example, children's poetry and poets, comics, wordless texts. This will be possible because we have more sessions and have begun to build a positive and open environment for discussion and learning. Reflection and evaluation will be built into the meetings as appropriate.

I have a huge respect for the reading volunteers. I want to continue to develop my knowledge of Beanstalk and the work the reading volunteers do in our primary schools. I have been invited to speak at a Beanstalk meeting and perhaps it would be possible to join one or more of the volunteers on one of their visits - to meet the children they read with and watch their conversations. I believe this will enhance my ability to lead and guide the group.