

Supporting learners to read for pleasure

A module for union learning reps

Sue Southwood, NIACE

“Four a.m. and the smart money's home in bed. More importantly for Murray Whelan, his son Red isn't. He's gone missing, on the run somewhere in Sydney. So what's Murray doing in a greasy spoon at the fruit and veg markets, nursing his facial bruising and talking to Donny Maitland about a grass-roots takeover of the truckies' union?”

The Big Ask
Shane Maloney



Background and welcome

Welcome to the Reading for Pleasure CPD module for union learning reps. This is a self-study module which should take you around three to four hours to complete. It should help and inspire you to read for pleasure and to support your members to do the same!

By the end of this module you will have:

- explored attitudes to reading and reading habits of your members
- Identified the benefits of reading for pleasure in the workplace
- Identified ideas to motivate and support your members to read for pleasure
- explored with your union and employer how best you can work together to support reading for pleasure.

“Sawkins was not popular with any of the others. When, about twelve months previously, he first came to work for Rushton & Co., he was a simple labourer, but since then he had ‘picked up’ a slight knowledge of the trade, and having armed himself with a putty-knife and put on a white jacket, regarded himself as a fully qualified painter. The others did not perhaps object to him trying to better his condition, but his wages – fivepence an hour – were twopence an hour less than the standard rate, and the result was that in slack times often a better workman was ‘stood off’ when Sawkins was kept on.”

The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists
Robert Tressell



Activity 1

What is “Reading for Pleasure”?

Before you go any further it’s a good idea to spend some time thinking about what you mean by “reading for pleasure”. Make a note here of your definition of “reading for pleasure”, and what you don’t include in that definition:

Our definition

This is the definition of reading for pleasure that we have used in developing this material:

“What we mean by reading for pleasure is reading where the purpose is primarily that of enjoyment.” This definition does not specify the type or level of text that is being read. It is possible, for example, to read a cook book as an instructional text – with the aim of cooking a particular recipe. It is equally possible to read a cook book for pleasure – in order to look at and think about food and cooking, without the intention of making any of the recipes.

Don’t forget the huge range of reading material for you to enjoy includes:

- Short stories
- Biographies
- Poems
- Blogs
- Newspapers
- Magazines
- Plays
- Coffee table-type books
- Art books
- Manuals
- Novels
- Comics
- Newsletters
- Brochures
- The Internet...

Remember, members for whom English is not their first language may read for pleasure in their mother tongue.



Activity 2

What do your members read for pleasure?

It is important to be aware of the kinds of “reading for pleasure” that your members engage in, or would like to engage in. This activity helps you to find out that information. Spend some time talking to a group of members, or several individuals, depending on your context. Ask them to think about what kinds of reading they do, or would like to do. You may find the checklist below a useful place to start or it may be helpful to ask members to consider whether there are any differences in their reading habits at work and at home.

If your members are unsure about what they’d enjoy reading, ask them to think about the TV programmes, hobbies or websites they enjoy, as this may give an indication of topics or genres. You may be able to extend your discussions with some groups or members to consider what it is that’s pleasurable about a particular kind of reading. For example, the illustrations and photographs are an important part of the enjoyment of magazines, for many people.

Also, think about your own attitudes first!

Attitudes to Reading Checklist (agree/disagree)

- I love reading
- I read a lot
- I have favourite authors
- I like reading fiction
- I like reading non-fiction
- I only read on holiday
- I read occasionally
- I have read some Quick Reads
- I would like to read for pleasure but I don’t know what to pick
- I read things I have to but not for pleasure
- I don’t have time to read
- I find a lot of texts difficult to read
- I find jargon and/or long words off-putting
- I fall asleep if I read
- I don’t like reading fiction
- I hate reading
- Other (write in)



Reflect on the discussions you had. Were there any surprises? Anything that makes you reconsider the kinds of reading material that you use with members? Record your reflections here:

“Sometime about a million and a half years ago, some forgotten genius of the hominid world did an unexpected thing. He (or very possibly she) took one stone and carefully used it to shape another. The result was a simple teardrop-shaped hand-axe, but it was the world’s first piece of advanced technology.”

A Short History of Nearly Everything
Bill Bryson

Why is reading for pleasure important?

There is a range of reading research that identifies reading for pleasure, or activities related to it, as crucial in the development of reading skills. The workplace demands an ability to read a wide variety of texts, such as:

- Read and understand health and safety information.
- Read instructions, emails, forms, plans and diagrams.
- Find and read information from operating manuals.
- Read reports and technical documents.
- Read timetables, maps, charts and other graphical information.
- Read staff information on posters, leaflets and newsletters.
- Use reference skills to find and sort information.
- Use the Internet.

Research also shows that when people are highly motivated, they can achieve a much higher level of skill. For instance, reading a challenging text if it is a topic of interest.

Reading fiction can help us understand character, to differentiate between fact and opinion and “see through” persuasive writing. It can help with empathy and understanding others’ viewpoints.

Reading for pleasure can also help to motivate individuals to read, and persist in their reading. For instance, using the Internet for fun can be highly motivating and it is possible to learn how to navigate the net and use search engines through following an interest or hobby. These important skills can be easily transferred into the workplace.

Again, lots of people are put off by graphs and charts in workplace documents – automatically assuming they will not be able to decipher the information. However, they may easily read and understand football league tables or cricket statistics.

Some individuals may feel comfortable consulting a car manual or comparing costs of different models but don't feel they would have the skills to understand budgetary or reference information at work.



Activity 3: What other examples can you think of?

Complete the table below.

Reading for pleasure can develop skills in:	How can these skills be used in the workplace?
Critical thinking	
Creative thinking	
Independent thinking	
Questioning	
Reading between the lines	
Analysing how a text is written	
Comparing and contrasting information	
Evaluating	



Activity 4

The following quotations, from individuals using Quick Reads, highlight a number of the potential benefits of reading for pleasure. Read the quotes and identify the benefits identified and how they can relate to the workplace. The first one is done for you.

“I found the book quite enjoyable. It was easy to read and understand. There was plenty going on in the book to keep you interested which made you want to keep reading.”

Motivation and persistence. If someone knows they can enjoy a book and keep reading, it may help them find the motivation and persistence to read long reports or to enjoy staff newsletters.

“I never done any reading before these books...it gives me the confidence within that I could carry on a long way and I realised what I was missing.”
(p2 QR Evaluation)

“It’s like joining a community of readers, we started discussing the books and getting feedback from others in the group.”
(p2 QR Evaluation)

“It’s like joining a community of readers, we started discussing the books and getting feedback from others in the group.” (p2 QR Evaluation)

“I’ll take one of these books home and go to bed half an hour early and make that my time...I go to bed and sit and read for half an hour whereas before I wouldn’t.”
(p3 QR evaluation)

“Baba dropped the stack of food stamps on her desk. ‘Thank you but I don’t want;’ Baba said. ‘We work always. In Afghanistan I work, In America I work. Thank you very much, Mrs. Dobbins, but I don’t like free money.’

Mrs. Dobbins blinked. Picked up the food stamps, looked from me to Baba like we were pulling a prank, or ‘slipping her a trick’ as Hassan used to say. ‘Fifteen years I been doin’ this job and nobody’s ever done this,’ she said. And that was how Baba ended those humiliating food stamp moments at the cash register and alleviated one of his greatest fears: that an Afghan would see him buying food with charity money. Baba walked out of the welfare office like a man cured of a tumour.”

The Kite Runner
Khaled Hosseini

Here are some things you can do to support your members:

- ✓ Recognise that, for some members, reading for pleasure is a step into the unknown.
- ✓ Promote the benefits of reading for pleasure to all colleagues.
- ✓ Provide members with opportunities to read for pleasure such as book swaps, reading groups or mobile libraries.
- ✓ Publicise opportunities.
- ✓ Help members to improve their reading skills through *Skills for Life* classes.
- ✓ Promote Quick Reads.
- ✓ Encourage your members to think through possible barriers to reading for pleasure and help them to find solutions.
- ✓ If members are concerned that their English isn’t good enough to read for pleasure you can help them to find a Skills for Life class or encourage them to improve their skills online using: www.bbc.co.uk/skillswise or www.move-on.org.uk
- ✓ For more ideas go to: www.readingagency.org.uk/adults/the-vital-link/
- ✓ Go to the Reading for Life website and download the **Reading for pleasure: Ideas to inspire people in the workplace**. Try out some of the ideas at: www.readingforlife.org.uk/



Activity 5

Read this article by Matt Harvey from *The Guardian*, 4 October 2008.

Let me ask you a question: You hear that a poet is coming into your workplace next week. Do you a) Think, great, I can't wait! b) Think, hmmm, intriguing, I wonder how this will impact upon performance and job satisfaction? c) Nod wryly and arrange to take off days in lieu or, d) Resign and sue for constructive dismissal?

Me? I'd tick a). I really would. But I can understand the c) and d) tickers. English poet Adrian Mitchell famously said, "Most people ignore most poetry because most poetry ignores most people." Which led another poet, John Hegley, to observe that most penguins ignore most putty for similar reasons. At best, most people's experience of poetry is of something dry and difficult, precious and twee. At worst it's akin to Vogon poetry from *The Hitchhikers Guide to The Galaxy* brain-scrapingly dull dross forced on you by aliens.

But I have a theory that gives me a warm, happy feeling. My theory is that most people like poetry. Really.

A man approached me at a recent festival. I'd just come offstage and I thought he wanted to congratulate me or buy a book. He leaned in close, excited; he had something he really wanted to tell me. For a grim second I thought he was going to recite poetry. I steeled myself for a Vogon moment. No, he wanted me to know that a few months ago he'd put a poem up on the board at work an unprecedented, unheard-of act. No one said anything, but no one took it down, and a few days later someone put a poem up beside it. He took his down and put another up. People began to talk about the poems. More went up. In an office where no-one had previously mentioned the P-word, they created a cherished and jealously guarded Poetry Corner. He shook my hand as if I was personally responsible.

It's clear to him, as it is to me, that poetry in the workplace is a good, good thing. But not the Vogon stuff. In my *Poetry Writers' Yearbook*, Hungarian poet Georges Szirtes points out that when someone does something wonderful, we often say, "Sheer poetry!" or "Poetry in motion!" The P-word is a compliment, except when it refers to its inky, wordy self. The same way they like some food. But they need to eat. We all do.

Poetry's not life and death, of course. But it is quality of life and death. Soul food. If there are five portions of non-material nourishment we need in a day, poetry provides three of them. And where better to get your five portions than the workplace where, apparently, we spend more time than with our families.

Thursday is National Poetry Day and the theme of this year's celebration is work. In workplaces up and down the country there'll be all kinds of cunning

poetry stunts. A City law firm plans to hold a board meeting in which only verse will be spoken. HSBC will host a reading by a Kazakh poet at its Canary Wharf headquarters. Shop workers at the Co-op in Penzance will offer poems in a tin to customers.

Seamus Heaney's *Digging* will be dusted down in schools and colleges, as will Philip Larkin's *Toads*: "Why should I let the toad work/ Squat on my life?" And its recanting sequel, *Toads Revisited*, which ends: "Give me your arm, old toad;/ Help me down Cemetery Road." Maybe Marge Piercy's *The Secretary Chant* will get an airing too. Great poems. Good stuff.

It's the one day in the year when poetry, and working poets like me, get invited through the front door. But if poetry is to infiltrate the workplace as I would like it to, it'll be through the eccentric, unilateral actions of people like the protagonist of John Osborne's *Simon Armitage* poem (see below) or my man at the festival. Or through the Poetry Trust putting up poster-poems in the loos and cafes of Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital.

However, its one thing to get poetry read in the workplace. Another to generate poems of the workplace. Where will the professional and trade poems come from?

An excellent role model can be found in the form of cowboy poetry. You heard me right, stranger. And I laughed, too, first time. But it does what it says on the hide. It gets lonesome on the trail, and thinkin' and reflectin' leads to writin' and to rhymin'. The results are gritty, witty, crafty and grafty. Don't believe me? Go to cowboypoetry.com and click on a lariat laureate. But when will we find plumbers', doctors', builders' or IT technicians' poetry? The latter already exists in the form of haiku error messages that grace the viral cyber byways:

Your file was so big
It might be very useful
But now it is gone.

A crash reduces
Your expensive computer
To a simple stone.

Maybe along with the annual splash of National Poetry Day we could have a weekly local ripple. Some workplaces have a dress-down Friday. We could call it wordy Wednesday, or talky Tuesday.

The other week our builder, Duncan, came in whistling a happy tune. "It's my favourite day today", he said. "Poets day". My ears pricked up. "What does that involve? Bringing in a poem?" "No." "Writing one?" "No", he said, "P.O.E.T. day. Piss off early today". For Duncan and his crew, every Friday is Poet's day.

It's a start.

Ode for Simon Armitage

Simon, I work at Anglia Windows
and no-one there has heard of you,
you were not on the GCSE syllabus
when we were at school.
That is why I am hiding bits of your
poems around the office

like treasure hunt clues.
Now people find you in filing
cabinets,
couplets scribbled in the margins
of company reports,
symbolism on spreadsheets,
half rhymes in ring binders.

I quote lines of your best poems
when I'm replying to group e-mails.
It makes it much less tedious.
I saw the girl I sit next to
appreciating a well-crafted simile
I had set on her computer as a
screensaver
when she had gone to the toilet.

I've even been outside.
I chalked entire stanzas
out in the car park.
I hope this does not infringe
on copyright.
I hacked into the Anglia Intranet
people from the Technical
Department
now find samples of your new
collection
where Installation Procedures used
to be.
Alan Medicott is going to be
furious.

I know people aren't going to bleed
Waterstone's dry
of the works of Simon Armitage
but there might be something for
someone to think about
when they're at home, at night,
making tomorrow's sandwiches.

What's your view on poetry?

- a. I love it
 - b. I hate it
 - c. I don't have an opinion on it
 - d. I don't understand it
-
- a. Great! Why don't you put up a poem that you love in your workplace and see if others will follow?
 - b. Find someone at work who loves it and ask them to recommend some poems or a poet for you to read.
 - c. Get one! Listen to a poem on www.bbc.co.uk/arts/poetry/outloud/ and discuss it with a colleague.
 - d. Go to www.xxxxx.com

Checklist on your union

1. Who else in the union/unionlearn is active in supporting members to read for pleasure? What information/ideas can you share with them?
2. Where does reading for pleasure sit with your union's policy on learning and skills?
3. What negotiation issues are there (or might there be) around supporting members to access reading for pleasure?

"There are variations in our workplace moans, but even these are largely predictable. Everyone moans about time, for example, but junior and low-grade employees are more likely to complain that it passes too slowly, that they have another seven sodding hours of this shift to get through, that they are bored and fed up and can't wait to get home, while more senior people usually whine that time just seems to fly past, that they never have enough of it to get through their ridiculous workload, and now there's another bloody meeting they have to go to."

Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour
Kate Fox



Activity 6

Use the questions below to get a dialogue going with your employer.

- What do you know about the attitudes to reading and reading habits of your members?
- Does the employer already support reading through libraries, book swaps or the Six Book Challenge?
- If the employer does not support reading, what prevents them from doing this?
- What types of reading are required in the workplace?
- Do staff have the level of skills needed to access the documents they are required to read?
- How can the union and employer work together to encourage reading for pleasure?



Are there any particular issues for your workplace? Make a note of them below.

Work with your employer to ensure they are doing everything they can to support staff to read for pleasure. Use the checklist below to help you.

What can employers do to support their staff to read for pleasure?

- Provide a space to read and an informal workplace library.
- Promote reading for pleasure.
- Purchase a set of Quick Reads.
- Provide opportunities to take part in reading groups.
- Provide opportunities to improve reading skills.



Inspiration: Fletcher's Bakery

Fletcher's Bakery is a large factory in the north of Sheffield employing over 600 people. A mobile library is sent to Fletcher's once every two weeks between the hours of 10.00am and 1.00pm on Mondays.

The aims of this service are:

- to introduce the library service to groups of people that were unlikely to otherwise access such services; and
- to support the work of the in-house learning centre in supporting the learning of employees with basic skills.

It was recognised that the stock on board would need to be targeted at the workforce. Therefore all the large print stock was removed and replaced with a quick-reads collection, a basic skills collection and a Polish language collection – including fiction and non-fiction – hired from a specialist supplier.

While one member of library staff remained on the vehicle, the other took a collection of stock, membership forms, and promotional materials into the factory canteen. Through direct contact, that member of staff promoted the service.

Other methods of promotion included announcements over the factory speaker system, and posters detailing when the mobile would be present and what stock would be available. These were translated into Polish. A relaxed approach to membership was adopted and people lacking two forms of ID (a requirement in Sheffield Libraries to join) were given limited borrowing rights.

The service created 23 new library members as well as introducing the library service to hundreds more through actual visits to the mobile, through reading the posters, or seeing the mobile on-site.

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Outcomes

- Many of the visitors had never entered a library before. Others had not used a library for many years.
- The Quick Reads books for emergent readers issued especially well.
- A significant proportion of the items issued were children's books, suggesting a wider benefit for the families of those using the service.
- On hearing about the trial, other factories within Sheffield requested the service.



Further resources of help:

[BBC Learning English www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/)

This BBC site has material which is useful for learners for whom English is a second language. Includes news English, an online interactive soap opera, music and quizzes.

www.niace.org.uk/quickreads/

Quick Reads are short, exciting books by bestselling writers and celebrities for adults who are new to reading, have lost the reading habit, or who prefer a quick read. A sample of 1,500 literacy tutors and 30,456 learners reported leaps in confidence, progression to higher levels of literacy and improved communication skills through using Quick Reads.

www.readingforlife.org.uk/

2008 was the National Year of Reading and this website takes forward this year-long celebration of reading, in all its forms. It aims to increase awareness of the many values of reading – anything, anytime, anyplace – for children, families and adult learners alike.

www.literacytrust.org.uk/vitalink/readingforpleasureideas.html

Contains ideas to inspire reading for pleasure and has downloadable materials to encourage reading for learners in education and in the workplace.

www.readingagency.org.uk/adults/the-vital-link/

The Vital Link connects library staff and Skills for Life staff to inspire new readers. The website contains information on the reading for pleasure campaign and resources to support reading.

The Reading for Pleasure suite of materials:

- CPD modules: Reading for pleasure in a number of contexts
- Storytelling: CPD unit with lesson ideas
- Families, Learning and Storytelling: Using archives for community cohesion
- Take Your Partner: Engaging emergent adult readers
- Technology and Reading: How to use blogs, wikis, iPods and e-books to promote reading
- Putting two and 2 together: Creating a bridge between literacy and numeracy learning
- Resources for libraries: Guidance on how to engage families to read for pleasure