

Chatabout: inspiring adults with literacy needs to join reading groups

The Reading Agency is delighted to announce the launch today of Chatabout, a unique new national network to support the growing number of reading groups for adults with literacy needs. Chatabout will help ensure that people who would benefit most from what reading groups have to offer will not miss out. The Reading Agency has a wealth of advice, support and resources for everyone working to engage and inspire adults to read for pleasure: they are invited to sign up now at www.chatabout.org.uk

Reading groups are growing fast in the UK as a powerful form of learning and cultural activity – in England and Wales the number of groups has risen by 149% over the last four years. The Reading Agency wants everyone to have the chance to belong to one – and especially those at the start of their reading journey. Over half of adults (56%) have literacy skills below the level of a good GCSE. Research tells us that reading for pleasure can improve people's skills at the same time as increasing their motivation to read and learn more, thus creating a virtuous circle. (See 'Notes to editors' for further statistical information.)

Chatabout's potential audience will be adults aged 16+ ranging from those with very low literacy to lapsed readers. Many will be in classes to improve their skills; some will not be involved in formal learning. Some may get involved as volunteers to run reading groups themselves.

Genevieve Clarke, adult literacy specialist with The Reading Agency, explains: "We've chosen the name Chatabout because we're keen that these groups bring people together to share their thoughts about books, but also about other things they read or watch or experience, just like any other reading group. Groups may take place in a library but they could meet in a college, workplace, community centre, hospital, prison, church or elsewhere, with their local public library in a support role. They may use audio, TV, digital media or gaming as a way into reading, and they may cater for specialist interests such as health literacy, family reading or English for Speakers of Other Languages."

For those already running or wanting to start a reading group, Chatabout activity will help develop and sustain the reading skills of those they are working with, boosting their confidence and sense of belonging and ultimately increasing their employability – as well as their enjoyment of reading.

Members of a Skills for Life reading group set up by Southend Libraries and Southend Adult Community College each read different books but meet in order to recommend titles to each other. "Members only miss a meeting if they are not well," says librarian and Skills for Life tutor Mandy Robinson. "They all regularly promote the benefits of belonging to the group to their peers in the college classroom." One of the group members, Margaret, add: "Since I've joined the group my reading has improved and I have become a more confident person."

Chatabout resources will include:

- A way for those working with emergent readers to network and share experiences online at www.chataboutreading.ning.com (only open to Chatabout members)
- Free case studies and practical guidance on setting up sustaining reading groups
- Links to existing free resources, such as the First Choice Books database and Quick Reads learning resources.
- Products to buy such as Chatabout group membership packs from April 2010 onwards

The Reading Agency has developed Chatabout from its experience in supporting emergent adult readers through the Six Book Challenge. Now in its third year, the Six Book Challenge encourages emergent readers to develop a reading habit through choosing, reading and expressing their views about books – see www.sixbookchallenge.org.uk. During 2009 nearly 9000 UK adults took part through libraries, colleges, adult and community education, workplaces and prisons – an increase of 25% on 2008. And the Six Book Challenge was a finalist in the CILIP Libraries Change Lives Award 2009.

“We see Chatabout as a way for people to progress as they get into reading through initiatives like the Six Book Challenge and Quick Reads,” adds Genevieve Clarke. “We all love to share views about what we’ve read and those new to reading are no different. There’s growing expertise in running reading groups in a whole range of settings including colleges and workplaces as well as libraries. We’re inviting people to join Chatabout as a way to share all their ideas and avoid reinventing the wheel.”

The Reading Agency is funded by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) via NIACE to develop this work, reflecting the Government’s support for reading group activity as part of formal and informal adult learning.

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Notes to editors:

- The Reading Agency is an independent charity working to inspire more people to read more. It is funded by the Arts Council and the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council. (www.readingagency.org.uk)
- Reading groups statistics: the number of groups in England and Wales has risen by 149% in the last four years. There are now roughly 10,000 library-linked reading groups in England and Wales, providing 100,000 people with new reading opportunities. Reading Group Mapping Data 2008 is available from The Reading Agency’s online shop at: www.readingagency.org.uk (go to publications section of the shop).
- Adult literacy statistics from Skills for Life: Progress in Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy (National Audit Office 2008) based on figures from The Skills for Life national needs and impact survey of literacy, numeracy and ICT skills (DfES 2003).
- Impact research: Practitioners leading research: Weaving reading for pleasure into the Skills for Life adult literacy curriculum (National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy 2007) and Six Book Challenge 2008: The Impact on Readers, by Sarah Grylls, Learning for Learning, for The Reading Agency (December 2008) are available to download at: www.readingagency.org.uk/adults/reading-for-pleasure-impact/