

I AM PART OF THEIR STORY

Clacton County High School,
Essex

Clacton County High School is an 11-18 mixed comprehensive school of approximately 1,600 students. The school is to become an Academy in April 2012. It serves the eastern half of the coastal town of Clacton-on-Sea, together with the adjacent town of Holland-on-Sea.

Teacher and librarian, Marina Lee, explains how Accelerated Reader has made a difference at Clacton County High over the past four years.



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Reading for pleasure

Library use

“As their confidence in the written word grows, the students’ attainment in other subjects is also improving”

As a school, we are not situated in an area that would necessarily be described as being deprived, yet every year approximately 70% of our Year 7 intake arrive with a reading age at least one year lower than their chronological age – and around 28% with a reading age of less than 10 years.

Since most text books have a SMOG (Simple Measure of Gobbledygook) readability level aimed at a reading age of 15-19 years, it was clear that we needed to raise reading ages by any means possible to enable students to engage more confidently with the needs of the curriculum. Thus in Autumn 2008, after much deliberation and investigation, we decided to trial AR. We have not looked back since!

Students have access to a wide range of texts within AR, both fiction and non-fiction. Library borrowing has soared by over 400% since we first started using the software as students have realised the scope of our provision and how vital books can be when it comes to homework, etc. The vast majority of students are very enthusiastic about AR and particularly enjoy the ICT element – even the STAR Reading tests! The library opens at 8am

Accelerated Reader has had an...incredible impact on student learning at our school

and there is quite often a queue of students waiting to come in to work and quiz on the books they have finished reading at home the night before. It is gratifying to note the increased number of students that are using the library in their own time, not only to quiz on AR books, but to complete homework and simply browse.

Although it could be argued that the increased library circulation is due to the fact that every Year 7 & 8 student is obliged to have a reading book, there is evidence of additional reading taking place in other areas. As students are now aware of what the library can offer non-fiction lending has rocketed and stayed high. I am also pleased to note that computer research in the library has dipped in favour of books! As their confidence in the written word grows, the students’ attainment in other subjects is also improving – and when they realise this for themselves their obvious delight is a joy to behold.

I cannot comment on this aspect of AR without passing on a conversation with Georgia, at the time a Year 8 student, which I think says it all. Georgia had been a very unwilling and disinterested reader, but suddenly she was quizzing and changing books nearly every day. Her friend stood at my desk with her when she was borrowing yet another book one time –

Friend: 'I just don't understand you, always reading. You're nuts!'

Georgia: 'No, you just don't get it, reading's great and when you can read well it makes everything easier.'

So of course my ears pricked up.

Me: 'So do you think reading better has made a difference for you in other subjects?'

Georgia: 'Omgod (sic), Yeah, miss!'

Me: 'So what subjects do you think it's made the most difference in?'

Georgia: 'Maths (at which point you could have knocked me down with a feather...) – because now I understand what the book is telling me to do.'

We use AR with Years 7 & 8 and 'invited guests' from other Year Groups. It has been incredibly encouraging to note that the number of these extra guests has greatly diminished as our initial cohort has moved up through the school.

I love having so much information at our fingertips, with just a few clicks of the mouse. Not only can I give instant information to teachers and students, I can present ready-made certificates as and when they are earned. Having so much detailed information instantly available has made our reward system incredibly easy to implement – we have an 'AR Hall of Fame', updated monthly, naming the student in each teaching group that has read the most words and a display that pitches Year 7 against Year 8, again updated monthly, where students are racing to see which Year can fill their mobile phone battery up with words the quickest (well, thermometers such as those seen outside churches totting up the roof fund seemed so old hat!). In addition, every student gaining 100% on a quiz gets a star on the library balcony with their name on, with a draw every half term for prizes and so on...the rewards are great for students and teachers alike, who also compete for the 'AR Foot on the Pedal' award each month – a canny librarian's ruse to keep staff on their toes as well!

I like to think that we use AR to its full advantage, though I do not let myself get complacent as after nearly four years of usage I am still discovering different aspects of the software – particularly in reporting – that are the most superb tools to have at our disposal! The ability to be able to identify specific groups of students is proving to be a godsend in these times where Ofsted inspectors are looking so vigorously at the attainment of Free School Meal (FSM) and English as an Additional Language (EAL) students to name just a few. Again, a few clicks of the mouse and hey presto! At this point I feel obliged to note that when the concept of AR was first mooted at Clacton County High School I was very cynical and could not see how such a programme could equal the claims made. However now I am probably its biggest advocate and there is no doubt that it has had an incredible impact on student learning at our school.

As a teacher/librarian delivering the majority of AR sessions I see Accelerated Reader from every possible angle! By being amongst the students as they work, I get a far better picture of the books that they enjoy most and can purchase stock confidently knowing that student needs are met – not only from the levels and quantities of books that are required, but also knowing that the subject matter will be enjoyed.

There is nothing more satisfying than a book that has fallen apart because it has been read so often! I have always loved my job, but with AR it now brings with it the satisfaction that our students are becoming more able and confident readers, with many discovering a real love and appreciation of the written word. It is also pleasing that the School Leadership Team recognise the importance of AR and that it is supported by positive comments from students, parents and staff.

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