

Gonville & Caius

‘Book Clubs’ expansion: final report

Thursday 15th May 2025

Background

In the Autumn of 2022, the Gonville and Caius outreach team (in collaboration with Newnham College) developed and piloted a set of Reading Group Resources. These resources aimed to provide teachers with a set of materials that would help them support super-curricular exploration through running 4-5 intervention reading group sessions with students in years 11 and/or 12.

The pilot set of resources were split into two subject areas: Science and Theology. Included within the resources were articles, podcasts, texts, and diagrams. These materials were then supplemented with prompt questions and summaries that teachers could use to facilitate reading groups for their students.

Since the pilot in 2022, these resources have proved hugely popular. Many teachers have noted the impact of the resources on allowing students to develop key skills for critical thinking, as well as highlighting to students the importance of learning *beyond the curriculum*. These resources have also helped many students understand how to conduct their own subject exploration in preparation for applying to university. One teacher commented that these resources have been ‘invaluable in demonstrating to students just how accessible and important it is to learn outside of the classroom’ ... ‘without these resources and prompt questions, me and my colleagues would have struggled to put anything of the sort together’.

The project

The Gonville & Caius outreach team made an application to the Isaac Newton Trust for a Widening Participation and Induction Fund award to support the expansion of these pilot resources in January 2024. Thanks to the generous support of the Trust, the College was able to offer schools a set of 13 different Book Club resources from the start of 2024’s autumn term. These were designed by PhD students at Caius and other Cambridge colleges, with whom the Caius outreach team had an existing relationship from work on other outreach projects. £2990 was received from the Trust, and was spent as follows:

Event	Date	Amount paid
Book club materials and meetings Geography	29/07/2024	£230.00
Book club materials and meetings Languages	01/08/2024	£230.00
Book club materials and meetings Religion	06/08/2024	£230.00
Book club materials and meetings Maths	08/08/2024	£230.00
Book club materials and meetings Physics	01/08/2024	£230.00
Book club materials and meetings Education + Soc Anthropology	06/08/2024	£460.00

Book club materials and meetings Design	13/08/2024	£230.00
Book club materials and meetings Literature	01/08/2024	£230.00
Book Club materials and meetings History	01/08/2024	£230.00
Book Club materials and meetings Engineering	13/08/2024	£230.00
Book Club materials and meetings Comp Sci	08/08/2024	£230.00
Book Club materials and meetings Land Ec	29/07/2024	£230.00
Total		£2,990.00

Between September 2024 and May 2025, 408 sets of materials were downloaded, and the project reached 111 different schools, demonstrating a large appetite for this kind of resource and intervention. As the below feedback makes clear, the level of engagement with the Book Clubs that each school was able to reach varied highly; but we are convinced that we are onto something here, and that there is great potential to develop this section of our outreach work focussed around school-based delivery.

Evaluation

A feedback form was set up and a link was sent to all colleagues who signed up to use the Book Club resources. This resulted in two colleagues giving feedback which is included in the summary table below. All colleagues who had downloaded the Book Club resources were subsequently emailed and asked give verbal feedback over the phone, email their feedback or complete the feedback questionnaire. In total nine colleagues gave feedback, so drawing firm conclusions is difficult. It is, however, possible to offer some observations, which will be done beneath the feedback summary table below.

Summary of Feedback

Information about the school	How materials were used	Feedback
RC mixed comprehensive school in Greenwich in SE London with a Required Improvement inspection grade 2023.	There were plans to implement the Book Clubs in the spring term 2025 however challenges in the school and a looming Ofsted inspection meant that priorities shifted and work with the more able in the school was postponed.	
Girls' comprehensive school in Bromley. Ofsted Good January 2024	Have downloaded materials but not been able to use them.	
Church of England mixed comprehensive in Bromley. Inspected in March 2025. Requires Improvement in all areas except for the sixth form which is graded as Good	Have downloaded materials but not been able to use them.	
RC girls' comprehensive school in Newham, East London. Outstanding (2022) including sixth form.	The school has not had the capacity to run the groups yet due to AS exams and interventions, but plan to run the groups after the May half-term/end of AS exams.	
Comprehensive girls' school in Bromley SE London. Good with outstanding features (2024)	Resources shared with teachers and students in the sixth form. No other formal structures were put in place.	Feedback from students: it gives them a starting point for super curricular reading around their chosen subject areas.
Catholic Boys school in Barnet with a mixed sixth form. Ofsted Good September 2023	<p>In October 2024 students in year 12 with strong GCSE scores were identified as students with potential to progress to high tariff universities (groups of 27). This group meet weekly for 20. Students are then divided into subject groups and the book club materials are used to provoke self managed discussion groups. This has been happening throughout the academic year and is ongoing. All Book Club resources were used in these student groups. Some materials with longer readings needed more teacher input to divide the material into appropriate lengths for the time students had together.</p> <p>Some of the materials have been used across the whole of the sixth form to support academic reading. Teachers are pleased with student engagement and are still working out the most effective ways to support super curricular engagement in their school.</p> <p>Feedback All materials have been used and are useful. The school would like more and in different subjects. Teacher notes are particularly useful as they give staff confidence to run the sessions – particularly staff who have not been to high tariff universities.</p>	

Anonymous Feedback so no school information gathered. All the resources we downloaded.	<p>Materials were made available to students in years 12 and 13. The colleagues in the school agreed that the materials were the right level for year 12 and 13, supported students engaging in ideas beyond the curriculum and supported academic discussions.</p> <p>In terms of improvements, they would like more materials in different subjects and would like the readings to provide more links to their reading and subject exploration.</p>	
Anonymous Feedback so no school information gathered. Computer Science resources were downloaded.	<p>The teacher encouraged their year 13 pupils to borrow any textbook resources, and the book club resources were part of this. The teacher felt that the resources offered reinforcement of concepts in computer science.</p> <p>Reflection: the computer science resources are a series of videos / reading and activities focused on different areas of computer science. They are all quite short which makes independent engagement by students easy.</p>	
Mixed comprehensive in Newham East London, with a successful and highly selective sixth form.	The materials were used during activities and in structures that the school already had in place to support super curricular exploration e.g. clubs and societies led by teachers. Resources were also used to support interview preparation (design).	<p>Languages resources good – detailed answers to the questions were helpful. This is an area where the school lacked resources, so these were helpful. Colleagues felt the pitch was right across the board. The teacher guidance was useful – especially for less experienced teachers.</p> <p>In engineering the students and teachers wanted problem solving to follow on from the reading.</p>

Reflections

Lack of engagement

Four out of the nine respondents have downloaded the resources but not used them. Two of these have plans to use the materials in a structured teacher-led way before the end of the summer term. From conversation with colleagues in schools it is clear that they are under significant pressure juggling a number of competing priorities. In schools where there are more limited numbers of students who may benefit from these resources implementing them in a structured teacher-led way may not be a priority. There is no obvious relationship between Ofsted judgements and engagement with these resources.

Teacher-led approach

One school that used these resources across the post-sixteen curriculum has a large selective sixth form (approx. 800) with an existing framework of teacher-supported super-curricular engagement. Colleagues leading these sessions used the Book Club resources to run these sessions and the curated materials and teacher support materials were useful and saved teacher time. Teachers indicated that the humanities and social sciences materials were used more effectively in this context. STEM subjects wanted more materials to support problems solving.

Another school used these materials in the development of a super-curricular engagement programme for the more able students in year 12. Their approach saw time set aside for students to meet, with students being directed towards the materials. All discussions, however, were led by students. This initiative is in its first year so whilst teachers are enthusiastic about the work that is taking place, the impact of it is yet to be seen.

Less structured approach to using materials

Two schools used the Book Club materials in a less structured way and simply offered the materials to their students in years 12 and 13 for them to engage with independently. One of them just reported on the use of the Computer Science materials and the other school downloaded all the materials and made them available to students. Neither school commented on the level of take-up but both said that the students found the materials a useful starting point for super-curricular exploration.

Next steps

There are a number of approaches that schools have used when incorporating the Book Club materials in the process of supporting students in making successful applications to high tariff universities. Over the next few months we will continue to build case studies of how schools use these materials with a view to sharing these models with our link schools. It is clear that that a significant proportion of schools that planned to engage did not manage to because of competing demands. Offering schools 'low teacher input' models for effectively using these resources may support the engagement of schools who expressed an interest in the Book Clubs but were not able to implement them.

There is significant future potential in this project without the need for any further financial investment. The Caius outreach team is very grateful for the Trust's support, without which this expansion project would not have been possible, and looks forward to continuing to develop this project in the coming months and years.