



# Engaging Teens in Recreational

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Being concerned about the decline in recreational reading among adolescent students, with several colleagues I began brainstorming ideas on how to better promote reading. One of the ideas that kept recurring was hosting a book club for our kids. Since the focus would be on reintroducing the idea of reading for pleasure and not just for academic purposes, I decided to hold the meetings during lunch so I could create a comfortable, welcoming environment.

I planned an initial interest meeting just to see how many kids might want to participate. I was expecting between twenty-five and thirty students for each lunch period; however, I had more than one hundred kids show up. This turnout raised an excellent question: With this large number of interested kids, how was I going to fund my club? Initially, I wrote grants, sought out corporate sponsors, and did some fundraising; however, my district saw the success of my project and began to fund the entire club. One reason I needed funds was to provide



# Reading through Book Clubs

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a book for each participant. I wanted students to not only have the book while we were reading it, but also to be able to keep it. Because it was theirs, they could share the book with friends or family; they could build their own libraries or read it again and again.

When planning a book club, there are several things to consider. First, what books will the club read? Second, how will meetings be organized? The first question was easy to answer. I knew I wanted to read young adult literature that was

popular and current, and the *Twilight* phenomenon was just getting started. I have used many series in my club over the years, but I usually read only the first book to pique students' interest, and then they can finish the series on their own.

Once I had the first title selected, the next question that needed to be answered was about the organization of the meetings. Our lunch periods are thirty minutes each. Students need time to get to the cafeteria, get their lunches, and get to the library. To expedite this process I designed

“front of the line” lunch passes for all those involved in book club so we could have as much time together as possible. Because of the time of the club and the fact that we had lunch together, our club became known as the Brown Bag Book Club. I planned on meeting three times for each book. Initially, we would meet, and I would introduce the book; interested students would then sign up to read the book. We would meet two more times to discuss the first and second halves of the book. The time between the first and second meetings varied, depending on how long it took for the books to arrive. Once students had stopped in the school library to pick up the books, I

gave them at least two weeks to read before we discussed the first half of the book. Before our third meeting, they had another two weeks to read the second half.

### Making Connections

Because I wanted to promote recreational reading, the last thing I wanted my club to feel like was another English class analyzing text. I wanted the students to make connections to the books we read, so I used discussion questions, games, and activities to achieve the goal of making reading fun. Below is a list of some books we have read and examples of activities we did with each text.

*The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins. Students were broken up into groups and were given twelve cards, each showing a different item needed for survival. Working together, students had to prioritize the items from most important to least important and justify their answers.

*Divergent* by Veronica Roth. Students came in and “joined” a faction by choosing to sit at particular tables marked with colors and symbols. Participants played a game called “Get to Know Your Faction” by deciding which faction a selection of famous people would belong to. For example, Mother Theresa would be part of the Abnegation faction because she was so selfless.



Figure 1. Best-selling author Lauren Kate (center) with Jil' Lana Heard (left) and Lori Bush (right).

Figure 2. Ruta Sepetys Skyping with the Brown Bag Book Club.

*Fallen*. Author Lauren Kate (see figure 1) visited and shared with the students her inspiration for the story. Since each student had received a copy of the book, everyone was able to get her autograph.

*Peak* by Roland Smith. To introduce the terminology of the story, I invited a veteran mountain climber to school to share his experiences and talk about his climbing equipment. His visit gave students the background knowledge necessary to understand the story.

*Fearless: The Undaunted Courage and Ultimate Sacrifice of Navy SEAL Team SIX Operator Adam Brown* by Eric Blehm. For this nonfiction text, I

partnered with another local book club to do a combined read. The school librarian and assistant at the neighboring school were both former military personnel. For our first meeting, they dressed in their fatigues and held an unofficial military briefing, similar to what Adam would have experienced preparing for his mission.

*Wonder* by R. J. Palacio. For one of our meetings the students discussed the precept, "When given the choice between being right and being kind, choose kind." Each student was given a "Wonder" button. They filled in the following sentence: \_\_\_\_\_ is a wonder because \_\_\_\_\_. Each student was

then able to give the button to the person the sentence was about.

*Between Shades of Gray* by Ruta Sepetys (see figure 2). Because the story has roots in the author's Lithuanian history, the best way for students to connect to the story was to hear from Ms. Sepetys herself. She Skyped with us and shared her personal journey that eventually became the fictionalized story.

## Branching Out

In the eight years I have been running the Brown Bag Book Club, I have worked with my district school librarians to extend the book club



Figure 3. Manga book club members with students visiting from Japan.



Figure 4. Manga club members experimenting with new foods and using chop sticks.

up to the local high school and down to the middle school, meaning students in grades 6 through 12 have the option to participate in a book club. We have hosted a teachers' book club and a school-wide read, and collaborated on a nonfiction title with a neighboring district's book club. This year I decided to expand into more specialized book clubs, so I started a Chick Lit book club and a Manga book club.

When selecting the books we are going to read in the Brown Bag Book Club, I try to select a variety of genres, with both male and female protagonists, take student requests, and try to appeal to a broad range of readers. When I decided to start specialized book clubs, I knew that the groups would be smaller but would appeal to readers with a passion for some very specific types of literature. Chick Lit selections are stories with strong female protagonists or emotional themes and have included *If I Stay* by Gayle Forman and *Birthmarked* by Caragh O'Brien.

When thinking about starting the Manga book club, I knew some challenges would have to be addressed. For example, a manga book can be read in a very short period of time; discussion would be brief if all students read the

same book. I decided to order the first book in eight different manga series, mainly because I wanted to encourage students to branch out and sample authors and, perhaps, subgenres new to them. Students in the manga club were each allowed to select a book they wanted to read. This book would be theirs to keep. However, I observed that the kids enjoyed swapping books with each other; this swapping allowed club members to sample a wider selection of books. Students could continue with a series by checking out the remainder of the books from the school library (two books at a time).

Since the students may not all be reading the same book, I focus on other topics for our meetings. The club has learned about the Japanese culture, and members were able to spend some time with students from Hanamaki, Japan, when they came for a visit (see figure 3). Club members and the visitors loved asking each other questions and talking about the art of anime and manga.

For two of our other meetings, I taught the kids how to make candy sushi and they practiced using chopsticks (see figure 4). The art of anime and manga is another popular topic with the kids. I turned their original creations into buttons

they used to decorate their school-issued lanyards. The buttons were a great way to personalize their school identification cards.

The success of book clubs is apparent in the number of books (3,495) I have put into the hands of students, as well as the expansion into multiple types of book clubs. When the students ask, "When is the next book club?" or "What are we reading next?" I know that I have helped them appreciate the joys of recreational reading, as well as having positively impacted their learning environment.



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