What’s it like to be a volunteer?

Two recently trained shared reading group leaders share their experiences here. First, Helena, who trained in early 2021 and helps to run our Glenfield group:

“I can highly recommend it”

I became aware of Leicestershire Shared Reading (LSR) during lockdown, and immediately felt a connection with its aim to "run shared reading groups which engage people (especially those who are older or isolated) with great literature at a deep and personal level, enabling them to form social connections, improving their mental wellbeing, and providing stability and support."

Whether I could help in achieving that aim was another matter! I joined lots of different groups to get a feel for the experience and I couldn't believe how much I enjoyed it. I was hooked. I must have attended 7 sessions in 2 weeks and was committed to the idea of running a group myself. LSR happily accepted my application, and I was signed up for the training course, run by The Reader, a long-established national charity that is "building a Reading Revolution, bringing people together and books to life in order to make warmer, healthier, stronger communities.

I found the course inspiring and couldn't wait to get stuck in. I'd forgotten how pleasurable it is to read aloud and I hadn't properly looked at a poem since leaving school over 40 years ago but best of all this was about sharing the experience, not doing it in isolation and not trying to be a literary critic.

The pandemic obviously meant I couldn't meet with a group of people face to face, but LSR had already established several Virtual Groups in Leicestershire and I was enthusiastically welcomed to join the team of Reader Leader volunteers. An added bonus was that I managed to persuade my 85 year old house-bound mother to grapple with the technology and she now has a host of new friends that she joins online each week.

What I love about shared reading groups is that everyone is welcome and everyone is valued, reading sessions are accessible to all and are non-judgmental. The story or poem is always kept at the centre of the discussion, which enables the group to get the most out of it.

What's important is people's personal response: it is not literary criticism, there are no right or wrong ways to respond, it is what someone feels in the moment . As a group we can explore shared meanings together. As a Reader Leader I can be bold in the choice of material - we read stories and poems that have something to say, even if they are challenging or uncomfortable. I know it's been a good session when I come away both exhausted and exhilarated. Happily the social distancing rules are being relaxed and I am now meeting with a group face to face as well as continuing with a Virtual group via Zoom, I won't pretend it isn't hard work, researching and preparing material every week but the sense of reward is more than worth it. If you're interested in being a Reader Leader or just want to join in the shared experience of reading and or listening, you'll find more information on the Leicestershire Shared Reading website - I can highly recommend it.

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Second, here is Jess, who can introduce herself:

My name is Jess Pascal and I’m an undergraduate student of Modern Languages at the University of Leicester. I did my Read to Lead training in September 2021 and have recently started co-leading one of the online groups. I find searching for texts to share a really nice opportunity to remind myself what’s good about reading for fun and not having to analyse, without adding a huge burden on top of my workload. Shared reading is such a great way to meet people and get out of the “uni bubble”. Everyone I’ve met from the organisation so far has been really kind and helpful, and I feel completely supported in my development. I’m learning a lot from this experience, and the training I had before starting was excellent, giving me the confidence I needed to begin. I would absolutely recommend shared reading to anyone considering it. Please feel free to get in contact if you have any further questions about what it’s like.