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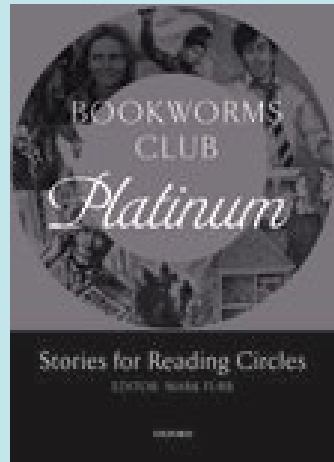
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Background

In my previous role, a common problem I encountered whilst teaching first year LL.B criminal law students, was their unwillingness and/or inability to read assigned cases in preparation for class. Research shows lack of compliance with assigned reading tasks is neither a new problem nor unique to the study of law (Burchfield & Sappington: 2000)

Reading Circles



The 'Oxford Bookworms Club Reading Circles'* combine many skills in the key skills matrix which include reading texts for detail, analysis, working with others, peer-learning and presentation skills.

As this structured, collaborative task worked well when I previously taught reading skills on the Foundation Year EAP programme in the Gulf, faced with low levels of case reading compliance on the LL.B, I took a proactive approach and adapted it to teaching law by devising a new seminar teaching method.

What is a reading circle?

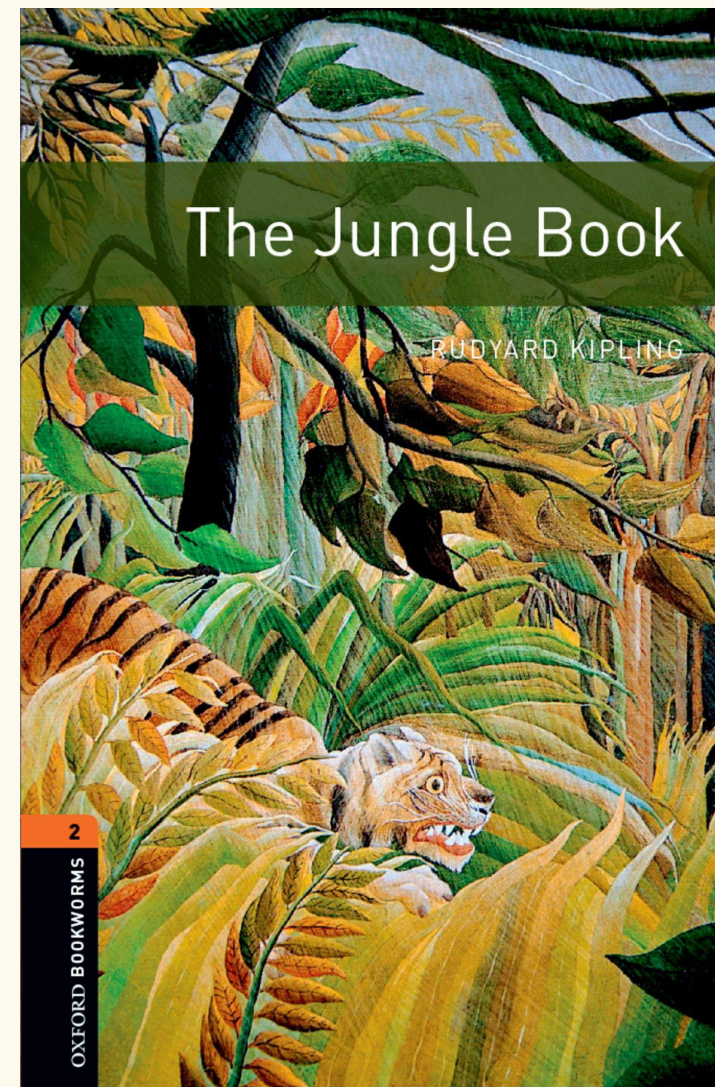
- It is small group of students who meet in the classroom to talk about the given 'story'.
- Each member of a group has a set role from ten such as Discussion Leader, commentator, Scene Setter.

Pedagogical Foundation

This structured, collective reading task added value to the student learning experience as all students were prepared for the seminar. Underpinning my use of this approach, were student-centred reading activities for legal texts, which have been discussed in research such as Hermida and Emmerich and Murphy, who espouse the benefits of 'collective effort reading' for students of the digital age.

Specifically:

- Collective, engaging reading practices, allow students to feel involved, with their contributions valued (Nguyen and Henderson, 2020).
- They can avoid 'passenger behaviour', where students attend seminars unprepared.
- The Case discussion Group made it clear to students that they are responsible for the seminar's preparation and lead (Race, 2007).
- The task also presented an integrated approach, incorporating further skills of applying the law to everyday scenarios, legal research skills and understanding the law in context through academic commentary. The Commentary Carrier role encourages critical analysis of a case
- The Case Discussion Group aligned successfully to one of the module outcomes of 'explaining key cases'.
- The Life Connector role in particular provided a firm basis for experiential learning in law.
- The task also had the benefit of promoting equality of opportunity for learners in that it moved away from traditional, written tasks such as writing a case summary. It thus particularly catered for dyslexic students (Lane, 2016: 139-14)



From The Jungle Book to Joint Enterprise

Adaptation of English Language Teaching techniques to Law

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Case Discussion Group

I re-named the Reading Circle to 'Case Discussion Group'. I also reduced the ten roles to six – with Group Leader (GL) and Life Connector (LC) transposed from the 'Oxford Bookworms' and created four, original, new roles more suited to caselaw reading:

Roles:

1. Group Leader (GL)

Read the case thoroughly and prepare five general questions about it, Ask one or two questions to start the discussion, Ensure all members participate, Call on a member to present their prepared information and Guide the discussion and keep it going.

2. Fact Master (FM)

Summarize the material facts of the case, so that the group can understand the case.

3. Legal Honcho (LH)

Read the case thoroughly so you can explain to the group both the legal procedure in the case and the main legal issues.

4. Judgment Juggler (JJ)

Explain to the group what the court decided and the reasons for the decision. Dissenting opinions should also be explained.

5. Commentary Carrier (CC)

This member of the group must read and present to the group two sources of academic commentary on the case, found in law journal articles and textbooks.

6. Life Connector (LC)

This role involves looking for connections between the case and daily life, whether a personal experience, that of family or friends or more general real-life events.

Students could choose to read the cases digitally (as almost all of them did) or on paper. In addition, role stickers were provided to students indicating which role (GL, etc) they were playing. The students enjoyed wearing the role badges which assisted the smooth running of the task in the seminar.

Impact and Conclusion

The impact of the case Discussion Group on student learning was valuable. Although data was not collected, I observed a significant increase in compliance with the assigned reading.

The students were engaged in the group discussion, including quiet students who are reluctant to speak up in front of the whole class. Crucially, each student was prepared so as not to disappoint their group.

The impact on the student learning experience was measurable from the module evaluation from students at the end of the academic year- 4.8/5 score for 'staff make the subject interesting' and 4.9/5 for 'the module is intellectually stimulating'.

The Case Discussion Group teaching method can be applied to other LL.B and diploma level law modules where case law reading is required.

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