

Impact case study (REF3)

| | | |
|--|---|---|
| Institution: The Open University | | |
| Unit of Assessment: D27 English Language and Literature | | |
| Title of case study: Transforming individual informal readers into communities of reader-researchers | | |
| Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2007-2020 | | |
| Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit: | | |
| Name(s): Dr Shafquat Towheed | Role(s) (e.g. job title): Senior Lecturer | Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: 01.06.2007 to present |
| Period when the claimed impact occurred: January 2014 - December 2020 | | |
| Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N | | |
| 1. Summary of the impact | | |
| <p>Towheed's research in the history of reading has generated impacts on learning, understanding and participation. This was achieved (1) by enabling public participation in large-scale collaborative research projects; (2) by transforming pedagogical practices beyond The Open University (OU), notably for teachers of KS4/KS5 school students; and (3) by enhancing informal learning, both for members of the public and within secure environments. Re (1), two projects led by Towheed, UK-RED (2007-) and READ-IT (2018-21), have used citizen science to turn informal learners into active researchers, transforming pedagogical practices within the subject area in the process. Regarding (2) and (3), a third project, Reading Communities (2015-2016), set up reading groups that facilitated the sharing of personal 'life stories of reading', transforming disparate individual readers into communities of 'reader researchers'.</p> | | |
| 2. Underpinning research | | |
| <p>Although research into the history of reading practices has grown immensely in the last two decades, the field has yet to contribute either new pedagogical practices or to make significant contributions to the public good. Towheed's research addresses directly these two concerns by asking who, where, how, why, when and what we read. His research has demonstrated (1) the importance of the reading experiences of ordinary people and its critical role in their personal self-development, and (2) that reading is a shared (and not just an individual) social practice [O1, O2, O3]. Towheed's research links the historical with the contemporary, both by using databases and online tools to recover evidence of reading from the past, and by sharing records from the past with contemporary readers.</p> <p>A key aspect of Towheed's research has been in working with digital humanists and IT developers in the design, development and production of online tools and digital resources. He was project supervisor of the UK Reading Experience Database (UK-RED) from 2007-2011 and Director from 2011 to date. Under his leadership, UK-RED amassed over 34,000 unique records of reading, of which more than 6,000 were crowdsourced contributions from 120+ volunteers using the 'citizen science' model [O6]. In all his research projects, Towheed has emphasized the perceived value for (and benefit to) non-specialist users – members of the public. By submitting records of reading, members of the public have acquired new communication and research skills, learned the value of their contribution to public knowledge, and gained the confidence to progress from informal voluntary research to formal study (including PhD research). Towheed has argued [O1, O2, O3] that the history of reading is an inherently collaborative endeavour. By designing research projects that have public contributions and participation at its core, Towheed has re-energised research and pedagogy in the history of reading, shifting the focus of research in the field from documents to people. In his current digital cultural heritage project READ-IT, Towheed invites user found/generated content, facilitates individual curation via public contribution, and thereby creates 'reader-researchers'.</p> <p>In his co-edited volume <i>Reading and the First World War</i> (2015), Towheed uses an archive-based methodology to argue for the connectedness of past and present readers [O4]. He articulates a key consideration that many historians of reading have ignored: that there is often an affective identification, mediated through empathy, between us and readers from the past.</p> | | |

This idea of connecting contemporary readers with the records of readers from the past transforms our own reading, forcing us to reflect on our own practice. This has been the central underpinning idea behind the Reading Communities and READ-IT projects.

Since 2015, the focus of Towheed's research has been comparative, international, and interdisciplinary, with an emphasis on the investigation of shared (rather than solitary) reading. Some of his underpinning research [O5] has had an iterative relationship with public engagement for impact, drawing directly upon questionnaire data and oral history interviews gathered as evidence of impact during the Reading Communities (2015-2016) project. Towheed's research continues to focus on reading as a collaborative social practice, seen for example in his current funded project, 'Reading the Middle East: examining the reading cultures of Freya Stark, 1919-1945'.

3. References to the research

- O1.** Towheed, S., Crone, R., and Halsey, K. eds. (2010) *The History of Reading*. London: Routledge. <http://oro.open.ac.uk/17524/>
- O2.** Towheed, S., and Owens, W.R. eds. (2011) *The History of Reading, Volume 1: International Perspectives, c. 1500-1990*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. <http://oro.open.ac.uk/29212/>
- O3.** Crone, R. and Towheed, S. eds. (2011) *The History of Reading, Volume 3: Methods, Strategies, Tactics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. <http://oro.open.ac.uk/29214/>
- O4.** Towheed, S., and King, E. eds. (2015) *Reading and the First World War: Readers, Texts, Archives*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. <http://oro.open.ac.uk/44511/>
- O5.** King, E.G.C., Parmar, M. and Towheed, S. (2019) 'Reusing historical questionnaire data and using newly commissioned oral history interviews as evidence in the history of reading', *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* 16:1 (May 2019). pp. 530–553. <http://oro.open.ac.uk/61387/>
- O6.** Database, dataset and digital resource: Towheed, S. et al. *The UK Reading Experience Database, 1450-1945* (2007 to present). <http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/reading/UK/>

All outputs were subject to blind peer review and have been also been certified as 2* or above by an independent external consultant who was a member of the REF2014 panel for D27.

4. Details of the impact

Towheed's research has generated significant impacts on learning, understanding and participation with four distinct beneficiary groups.

(1) *Volunteer-researchers: HEIs and 'citizen science'*

Drawing upon his research [O1-O4, O6], Towheed demonstrated the successful UK-RED and READ-IT volunteer-researcher/ citizen science model at workshops at higher education institutions in Florence, Italy (2014), Campinas, Brazil (2014), Haverford, USA (2014), Reunion, France (2014, 2017), London (2015), and online with universities in Canada (2019) and Germany (2019). As a result, Towheed's volunteer-researcher model has been adopted at pre-university, undergraduate and graduate level by HEIs in the UK (e.g. Bedfordshire, Southampton) and beyond: at the Autonomous University of Madrid, Spain (2016-), University of Reunion, France (2017), the University of Alberta, Canada (2019-20), Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz (2014-19) and Muenster University, Germany (2014, 2020). Towheed's model has transformed pedagogical practice in the history of reading for both instructors and participants at the following institutions:

University of Southampton

UK-RED is a central free learning resource for the 'Jane Austen: myth, reality and global celebrity' MOOC (on the FutureLearn platform) which has enrolled nearly 41,000 students since it was launched in April 2018 [C1]. The MOOC was designed around the UK-RED database and

Towheed's model of transforming members of the public into active learner-researchers. Students must search UK-RED to find out about readers of Austen through history and write a report on it. The MOOC was rated at 4.8/5.0 by the students completing the December 2020 course. For many students this is their first engagement with a research database and their comments on becoming active researchers are positive: "*brilliant tool!*", "*I love this database*", "*what a wonderful resource*", "*fascinating database which I'd never heard of before, I think I will be returning to it*", "*fantastic resource*", "*I enjoyed searching for information*", "*I'll be coming back to this again and again to explore more*" ([C1], sampled from 324 comments from the December 2020 cohort). As part of Southampton's widening participation plan, the MOOC shows how UK-RED has fostered both pedagogical innovation and a measurable benefit to informal learners wanting to sample university-level study.

University of Bedfordshire, UK

Prof Alexis Weedon has used UK-RED as a core resource on undergraduate and postgraduate modules (2014) and has noted how it has transformed her students' understanding of how to study literature: "*UK-RED has provided an evidence base for the study of reading and shifted the focus of research from the author to the actual reader [...]. Few now will study a text without asking who really read it*" [C2].

Autonomous University of Madrid, Spain

After spending 6 months as a visiting fellow (2015) working with Towheed on the UK-RED database, Dr Ana Gonzalez-Rivas has embedded the use of UK-RED in her institution. "*On my return to the Autonomous University of Madrid I shared the learned methodology with the members of the research group I belong to (HLGE: Historiografía de la Literatura Grecolatina en España)*", thereby training an additional cohort of Spanish academics in a transformative new pedagogical practice [C2].

University of Reunion, France

Working with Dr Florence Pellegry, Towheed introduced the UK-RED database to 58 graduate students enrolled in the 'Monde Anglophone' MA (British Literature and History, 2017) via a bespoke short course. UK-RED was integrated into the assessment of the MA students, who were obliged to use it to develop their own research topics. Pedagogical practice for both instructors and learners was transformed, as Pellegry confirms: "*it allowed the students a first-hand approach to academic research*" and "*the fact that some of the input to the site was made by volunteer researchers also greatly intrigued and inspired some of the students*" [C2]. This change in pedagogical practice has been institutionalised, with Pellegry continuing to use the resource with MA students.

University of Alberta, Canada

Prof Danielle Fuller integrated UK-RED as a teaching and research resource into her new Level 2 undergraduate module ('Histories of reading', 2019-2020) with a first cohort of 34 students. She describes it as "*a tremendous resource*" with "*outstanding online accompanying materials*" that has "*changed her pedagogical practice' with students, by opening up 'the opportunity for students to work with primary data as part of their own research*" [C2]. Prof Julie Rak adopted Towheed's *The History of Reading: A Reader* (2010) as the set text and UK-RED as a core resource for her new Level 2 undergraduate module ('Reading Histories, Making Readers', 2019-2020) with a cohort of 37 students. She describes how "*the research methods of Dr. Towheed and the RED team lend themselves to active learning, and to students learning for themselves, changing the classroom from a passive to an active space*", adding that it "*helped to make me a more effective teacher, and has helped my students to engage with the material and methods of reading studies in a way that made a real difference to them*" [C2].

University of Muenster and Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz, Germany

Prof Corinna Norrick-Rühl has used the UK-RED (2014) database and the READ-IT public contribution system as resources integrated in her teaching and assessment of some 400 students at JGU-Mainz (2014-2019) and has subsequently transferred this change in pedagogical practice to the University of Muenster (2019), where she has introduced a further

100 students to these resources. Using Towheed's volunteer-researcher model with her students has benefitted both learners and instructors: students *"profited substantially from the database exercises to grow their study and research skills", while 'as a researcher, I find RED and READ-IT to be vital and look forward to using them in my work"* [C2].

(2) Teachers and pupils

Towheed's research has transformed the understanding of the history of reading in schools, contributing to improved educational attainment. Since 2015, The Brilliant Club Scholars Programme (BCSP) teacher and former UK-RED volunteer Dr Sophie Bankes has used UK-RED as a research resource with over 1,000 students in 38 different non-selective state schools, working with KS4 and KS5 students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Bankes has created new teaching material on the history of reading by integrating UK-RED into skills training for student assignments. Her own teaching practice has been fundamentally changed: *"reading can be transformative [...] education enables social agency. It is this concept that has become important to me as an educator, and which can be seen through my work with The Brilliant Club"* [C5]. The impact on students has been dramatic: 79% of Year 12 students applied to university, 74% received an offer, and 56% progressed to university – compared to 30% in a UCAS control group of students from the same socio-demographic and GCSE attainment [C4]. Through BCSP, KS5 students have also contributed to the READ-IT project by completing and returning postcards recording their experiences of reading, thereby making the first step from users to researchers. KS4/KS5 Students' confidence as researchers was boosted by engaging with Towheed's research: *"It also shows you the significance of reading and how much it has the ability to transform your life completely"*. Another student commented on how reading could enable active citizens: *"it made me not only think about my own reading habits, but it also made me think about the reading habits of others [...] reading is essential to daily life in the UK as it allows people to access many aspects of society"* [C5].

(3) Members of the public as 'reader researchers'

Towheed designed a facilitated reading group model to engage members of the public as participants and researchers in his Reading Communities project. The model was fine-tuned at 6 public events in 2016 in Belfast; Birmingham; Edinburgh (2), Liverpool and London. At these events, Towheed presented short extracts on reading experiences to the groups, who were then encouraged to share their own 'life stories of reading', with testimonies recorded as research data for UK-RED and READ-IT [C6, C8]. This collective self-reflection transformed the individual readers into communities of 'reader researchers'. 88% of attendees at Reading Communities events rated the event good to outstanding; 93% rated the Reading Communities project itself as good to outstanding; and 74% of participants expressed how their understanding of the importance of reading has changed significantly because of their attendance and participation [C8]. Members of the public said that the events were *"inspiring and a great opportunity to share a love of reading"* and they valued *"an opportunity to chat to others about their experiences of reading, and how it affected or even changed their lives, which is something that even in my book group, is not brought up and talked about"* [C8]. Two attendees (Jenny Cattier and Patricia Ferguson) have since commenced PhD research on reading communities. Cattier described attending the Liverpool event as *"a pivotal moment for me [...] in terms of my future studies" as it 'opened my eyes to a whole world of work in progress that focuses on understanding how reading can help improve mental wellbeing [...] this event motivated me to put together my PhD proposal"* [C7]. Previously a UK-RED volunteer, Ferguson describes her engagement with the reader-researcher model as transformative: *"sharing my work in public at the 'Reading Communities' event gave me confidence in presenting and networking [...]. I would never have acquired the skills necessary for making the journey from private individual to accomplished researcher [...] without the Open University's UK-RED project and the public engagement activities which followed from it I would never have achieved the status of doctoral research candidate"* [C7]. Towheed's facilitated reading group model [C6] has since been utilized in further public engagement events: Being Human (Edinburgh, 2017, Milton Keynes, 2018;

London, 2020); Book Week Scotland (2017, 2019); Cambridge Science Festival (2019), and the Belfast Imagine! Festival of Ideas and Politics (2017).

(4) People in secure environments (HMP Hull)

Towheed's advocacy of the 'reader researcher' model has now been extended to benefit vulnerable offline groups. In 2020 he was approached by Rachel Healey (resident clinical psychologist at HMP Hull) to work with their reading programme for residents. 'Reader researcher' participation in the READ-IT project was introduced to 45 residents in a secured environment. Individual postcard packs with prompt questions about their reading were distributed remotely to all residents at HMP Hull and replaced their twice weekly face-to-face voluntary reading group sessions (suspended due to the pandemic). Postcard packs are designed to develop communication skills, build self-esteem and confidence, express thoughts and feelings, and manage potential conflict. For the first time, residents in HMP Hull have been empowered to become 'reader researchers', to reflect on their own reading, value their responses to reading, and to share these with a public-facing research project. Resident psychologist Healey has observed that the activity will *"likely help with their mental wellbeing, being asked to reflect on their reading, which is something to take their mind away from the current situation that they are in"* [C9], while residents themselves have commented that reflecting on their reading *"takes you away from what's going on around you"*, helps to *"escape from reality for a while"* and *"keeps my brain active, because I want to learn more about life"* [C10].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- C1.** Summative Data. University of Southampton Future Learn. Jane Austen MOOC.
- C2.** Testimonials. Prof Alexis Weedon (University of Bedfordshire, UK) May 2020. Dr Ana Gonzalez-Rivas (Autonomous University of Madrid, Spain) May 2020. Dr Florence Pellegrin (Université de La Réunion, France) December 2020. Prof Danielle Fuller (University of Alberta, Canada) February 2020. Prof Julie Rak (University of Alberta, Canada) 3 December 2020. Dr Corinna Norrick-Rühl (University of Mainz, University of Muenster, Germany) January 2021.
- C3.** Testimonial. Researcher in Schools (RIS), The Brilliant Club. January 2020.
- C4.** Summative Data. Dr Andy Fleming, Regional Manager (South) The Brilliant Club. September 2020.
- C5.** Questionnaires. Transcribed and original copies of Feedback from KS4 – KS5 Students (2019-2020 cohort). February 2020.
- C6.** Audio-Visual. Participant interviews as part of 'Reading Communities' project (2016): Patricia Ferguson, Jenny Cattier.
- C7.** Testimonials. Patricia Ferguson, January 2021. Jenny Cattier, December 2020.
- C8.** Summative report. Participation from 'Reading Communities' events (2016).
- C9.** Testimonial. Rachel Healey, PIPE Clinical Lead, HMP Hull, December 2020.
- C10.** Summative report. Participation from residents in secure environment, HMP Hull. December 2020.