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Shelftalkers: Empowering Student Voice

Abstract

This paper will describe a new initiative of the School Library Association of Victoria. Shelftalkers is a website that publishes 100-word student reviews of texts they are reading or have been sent by arrangement with publishers for review. The process is facilitated by the school library and is open to students of any age. The project aims to give students a voice, give school library staff and publishers an insight into student views, and allows participating school libraries to be central players in the literacy development and reading culture of their respective schools.

Keywords: literacy development, reading culture, student writing, book reviews

Introduction

The School Library Association of Victoria has recently created the website - *Shelftalkers*. This website publishes short reviews by students of texts they are reading, or have been sent by arrangement with publishers for review. The process is facilitated by the school library and is open to students of all ages. The project is only its infancy, but we are confident of strong growth with great uptake of the idea by Victorian school libraries. The project aims to give students a voice, give school library staff and publishers an insight into student views, and allows participating school libraries to be central players in the literacy development and reading culture of their respective school communities.

Engagement and Voice

The education sphere recognises that involving students in the educational process, allowing them a voice in what they are learning and how they learn, improves their levels of engagement. Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) found:

> The more educators give students choice, control, challenge, and collaborative opportunities, the more motivation and engagement are likely to rise. (p. 28)

The movement to incorporate greater levels of student voice into education is centred around the view that there is value in student-centred learning. Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) said:

> Educators committed to student-centered learning recognize this by looking for ways to incorporate choice, expression, and self-determination in classroom activity. (p. 29)

and that "Motivation, engagement, and voice are the trifecta of student-centered learning" (2012 p. 33). Graham et. al. (2017) found that "An important element of student participation is for students to have a 'voice' or 'a say' in different areas of school life" (p. 7). They also suggested that to be beneficial in a range of areas, including wellbeing, "students' views need to 'have influence'" (p. 7).

Vukovic (2018), in a discussion around good practice in relation to promoting student voice, found:

> …if you're going to encourage students to have a voice – you need to do more than listen to it, you need to actually do something with it…. students shouldn't be passive recipients in the classroom. (para. 14)

Student reviewing via the new Shelftalkers initiative aims to be part of this approach. The website offers students, through their school libraries, the opportunity to share their opinions in a meaningful way and to have their opinions on their own reading heard. As the quantity of reviews builds on the website, we hope that it can become a positive resource offering students anywhere the opinions of their peers as both advice and inspiration. Ultimately, we hope this can play a part in keeping readers motivated and engaged.

The Value of Reviewing

Reviewing a book is an interesting exercise that may initially seem easy, but the limitations imposed by word limits, and the need to convey feelings, opinions, and reactions to a text, are not always easy to capture adequately. This makes writing a review an interesting writing exercise and a very public, and sometimes challenging, form for sharing responses.

Nodelman and Reimer (1993), in a section of their book *The Pleasures of Children's Literature* entitled "Writing about What You Read," quote Zinsser:

> In *Writing to Learn*, William Zinsser says, "Writing organizes and clarifies our thoughts. Writing is how we think our way into a subject and make it our own. Writing enables us to find out what we know – and what we don't know – about whatever we're trying to learn"…As people write, gaps and illogicalities in their thinking become apparent to them, and they can think about ways of filling the gaps and clarifying the logic. (p.11)

The constraints of sharing opinions in writing, specifically in writing a review, can be quite meaningful, as the task encourages us to think through our views and reactions. Young people engaging in writing such as this inevitably practice and improve these skills.

This is recognised in Australia, where these activities are mentioned in curriculum documentation. The Victorian Curriculum Assessment Authority (n.d.), in its description of English curriculum at years nine and ten, stipulates:

Students create a range of imaginative, informative and persuasive types of texts including narratives, procedures, performances, reports, discussions, literary analyses, transformations of texts and reviews.

Learning these writing skills is complex and requires practice. Reviewing for a project such as Shelftalkers offers practice of these skills beyond the classroom context and allows students the opportunity to have worldwide exposure of their views. Benner, Brown, and Jeffrey (2019) note in their article "Elevating Student Voice in Education," that one valuable activity for giving students a voice is the area of student journalism. Reviewing is a similar short form that encapsulates many of the same skills.

In discussing the establishment of a community of readers, La Marca and Macintyre in *Knowing Readers: Unlocking the Pleasures of Reading* (2006), consider ways we respond to text, saying:
> For a community of readers to develop, student responses are sought and valued, and the teacher's motivation is to get at the students' ideas and reactions, not to set a teacher-designed or orchestrated agenda. Strategies and activities around texts and reading are designed to stimulate interest, motivation and enjoyment in reading as a pleasurable – not assessed activity. (p. 47)

Reviewing, facilitated in this case by the school library, is just such an activity, as it is fully in the control of the reader. Shelftalkers welcomes all considered opinions, and we hope the site is a space where students can freely share their responses to what they have read. It is also hoped that the site can serve as an extension of the student's community of readers, allowing them to share with others, as well as read the opinions of students not within their immediate community. La Marca and Macintyre go on to say:
> One of the great pleasures of being a reader that we want our young readers to experience, is to recognise that they belong to a community of like-minded people across local communities, states, countries, and continents. (p. 57)

**Facilitating a Reading Culture**
In his important book, *Tell Me: Children, Reading and Talking,* Chambers (1993) poses the question "Are children critics?" (p. 29). In considering this idea, he goes on to say:
> They instinctively question, report, compare and judge. Left to themselves, they make their opinions and feeling plain, and are interested in the feelings of their friends. (p. 29)

The entire focus of this book is the power of these opinions and the important role encouraging talk about books can play in the development of readers and a community reading culture. Shelftalkers aims to be a forum for the sharing of such opinions, a vehicle to allow a "talk" of a kind that gives the child reader a voice and a platform for sharing beyond their own immediate community.

Our goal is for Shelftalkers to empower young readers, to give them a sense of ownership and autonomy in sharing their thoughts about what they read, and what is being published and marketed to them. We want to recognise their right to a voice in this space, and the value of their opinions. We hope that the site encourages the development of writing skills, as young people write reviews for the site and hone their skills in description, analysis, comparison, and persuasion. As the site allows readers to access the views of other readers, we hope it will encourage young people to explore new titles and authors they have not yet experienced. A great deal of research tells us that peer recommendation is one of the main ways students find their next great read (Krashen, 2004, p. 90). Shelftalkers creates the opportunity for students to read the opinions of students beyond their own classroom.

Any school library staff member, publisher, or bookseller working with young people wants and needs to know what young people think about their reading experiences. Shelftalkers offers a space where all these professionals can learn the opinions and views of young readers. The more knowledgeable we are about the opinions and views of young people, the more likely we are to create responsive, accessible collections and develop engaging programming in our school libraries and our classrooms.
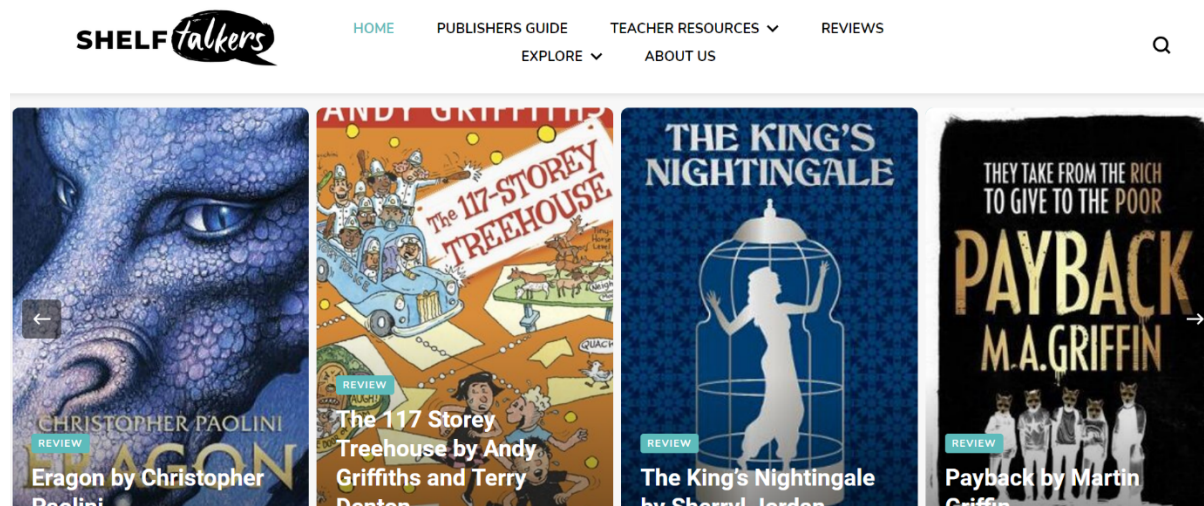
The more we share, the more we are all engaged, the more likely we are to create a vibrant, active reading culture within our school communities. Engagement is continually noted as the key. Early PISA recommendations in their 'Reading for Change' report noted that:

> One crucial factor the education systems can work on is the degree to which students are well motivated readers. This report shows that the degree to which students are engaged in reading is a crucial factor associated with reading proficiency. (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2000, p. 3)

Shelftalkers aims to be part of the equation in engaging students with their reading, promoting reflection and the power of sharing their ideas and views. Shelftalkers was launched in February of 2021 at our February Reading Forum. Since then, we have been delighted to see many of the members of the School Library Association of Victoria express enthusiasm in putting their respective schools forward to participate in, and contribute to, Shelftalkers.

Shelftalkers was created by the team of Dr. Susan La Marca, Tye Cattanach, and Monica Williams, with the support of the School Library Association of Victoria's (SLAV) Committee of Management and its State Council, led by the President, Dianne Ruffles. Shelftalkers is designed to not only to provide a platform for student reading and writing, but it also aims to facilitate a unique partnership between publishers and their target audiences. SLAV has partnered with both global and independent local publishers, matching them to schools that have suitable audience ages for their forthcoming titles. Publishers may refer to these student reviews in their marketing and publicity material.

Careful consideration was given to the look and feel of the website and its subsequent branding. SLAV wanted the website to look professional and clean, but we were also aware that the overall look and feel needed to appeal to students, so that they would be enthusiastic about visiting the site. Melbourne based designer Robyn Dixon developed mood boards and typography based on relevant current pop culture, and a strong brand emerged.
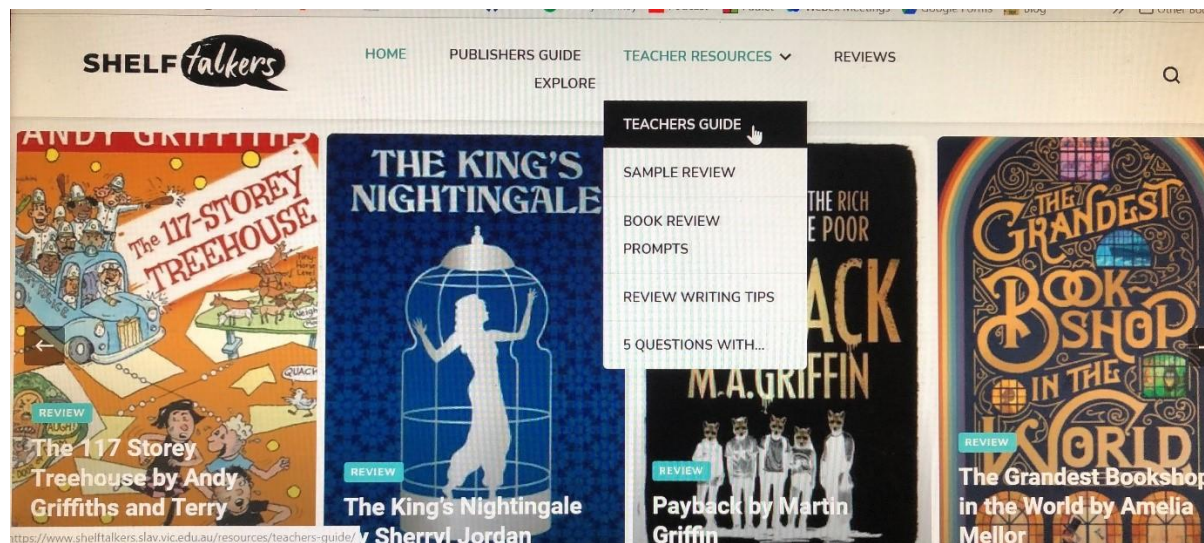

Shelftalkers welcomes contributions from all readers at both primary and secondary school level, and the books reviewed can be old favourites, new releases, or advance copies sent to the students by publishers. Reviews are restricted to one hundred words, and contributors are asked to give the book a star rating. The site is fully searchable and uses the cover illustrations in the layout to entice and engage.

It is hoped that the site will be a useful tool in reading promotion programs, where library staff can share the site with students who may be looking for their next great read.

Invitation

We welcome international community use of the site. We also welcome reviews in English from children anywhere in the world. The website contains a guide to submitting a book review: https://www.shelftalkers.slav.vic.edu.au/resources/teachers-guide/, as well as a range of other tips and hints in the teachers' resources area: https://www.shelftalkers.slav.vic.edu.au/resources/ .

We would be thrilled to receive reviews that meet our minimal guidelines. We hope to grow something useful that will foster good writing and reviewing, encourage student opinion, and foster reading communities. We welcome the involvement of your reading community in this project.

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