

In an age of short attention spans Cranbrook's teachers are using innovative ways to ensure our students develop both a love of reading as well as vital digital literacy skills.

MANY TEACHERS AND PARENTS are faced with the conundrum of how to keep literacy alive in the hearts of our students, as the instant gratification of smart phones and social media compete with the more leisurely past-time of reading a good book. Anecdotally, while reading for fun remains strong in the early years, Cranbrook's English teachers have noticed a general decline in reading in older years, especially once a student reaches Years 9 and 10. This sentiment is backed by research from the American Psychological Association, which indicates less than 20% of US teenagers read a book, magazine or newspaper daily for pleasure, while 80% use social media every day.

For many schools, the role of the library has become a delicate balancing act between promoting reading and teaching digital literacy. The library's role is not just to help develop critical thinking skills that accompany the reading and analysis of physical books, but extends to include the critical evaluation of information, research and lessons about misinformation, which are crucial lessons not just for now, but to prepare students for life outside the school gates.

In the past five years, some schools across Australia have decided to remove physical books altogether in schools, in preference for virtual libraries. However, this transition is not echoed by Cranbrook's librarians and English teachers, who say the benefits of reading a physical book account for better comprehension and critical thinking. Research from the Scottish Library and Information Council found school libraries that have large, high-quality multi-format reading and information collections also improve student academic achievement, successful curriculum outcomes, information literacy and positive attitudes to learning.

Although eReaders such as Kindles are supported, Digital Literacy Leader and Teacher Librarian at the Junior School, Megan Light, says she recently surveyed students in Years 3 to 6 and found around 90% of students preferred reading a physical book to an electronic reader. "Numerous research studies support the importance of reading for a child's development and highlight the profound impact that reading has on a child's cognitive, emotional, and social development," she says.

Head of English Stephen Henriques says technology is central to many students' worlds and for many, it is firmly in their comfort zone. "However, as English teachers we encourage reading through print form as research has shown the tactile act

of holding a book encourages deeper immersion into the narrative form," he says. "While digital texts have the value of convenience, print form remains the overwhelming favourite as it allows students to slow down and take a breath," he says.

Library Assistant Siobhan Morrell says the act of reading is also great training for improving attention span and the ability to think deeply. "Reading fiction is great way to develop empathy and emotional intelligence, which leads to better interpersonal skills, which are becoming increasingly important in a digital world," she says.

The role of the library

ENGLISH TEACHER NICOLAS DI CAMPLI says the library plays a pivotal role in English lessons, with one library lesson every cycle for Years 7 to 10, with students in Years 7 and 8 supported by a Teacher Librarian. The Year 7 reading programme also sees one mentor period every cycle in the library.

During Geography, students head to the library to focus on digital literacy, research skills, critical thinking around online information, and how to communicate and share information responsibly and successfully. In senior classes students are also taught research and referencing skills, and how to organise information.

Nicolas says the library is also a place for students to meet and to play board games and collaborate for clubs at lunchtime, recess and before school. He also runs a popular book club, Starbooks Café, during lunchtimes on Tuesdays. "This year we have looked at *Holes*, *War-Cross*, and *Of Mice and Men*, and are planning on looking at *Heartstopper*. The club has been a fantastic place for students to discuss their insights and opinions on what they are reading with peers, which challenges their individual perspectives and introduces them to alternative ways of viewing the same texts. It's also a good way for them to meet like-minded peers, so the club serves a dual social and literacy function," he says.

Supporting digital literacy

HEAD OF THE LIBRARY AND DIGITAL SERVICES in the Senior School, Tara Schmidtke, says the library at Cranbrook is the heart of the School. "A modern library needs to be more than a repository for books. It needs to be a living, breathing space that encourages reading, and also the sharing of ideas, sparking imagination, and fostering connections between peers," she says.

KEEPING LITERACY ALIVE

Digital learning plays a significant role within the library, to ensure the School remains at the forefront of technology that supports education. “There’s a genuine concern of getting lost in the sheer volume of information - it’s a bit like trying to drink from a firehose,” Tara says. Within the library setting, students receive targeted lessons in digital and information literacy focusing on providing the skills to become a discerning thinker. “Students need to be able to adeptly scrutinise the information they come across,” Tara says. “With AI finding itself into every aspect of our daily lives, it’s even more crucial for our students to be well-versed in these competencies,” she says.

Cranbrook’s ethos is to look at the whole child and digital learning can be a useful tool depending on the individual learner profile. “Students process information differently and digital tools may help to support that. For some, reading is challenging, and the mechanics create a barrier to accessing the content. What is best for one student is not necessarily the best for another,” Tara says. “While I will always prefer a paper book over an e-book

RETHINKING ENGLISH PEDAGOGY #POETRYISNOTDEAD

Cranbrook English teacher Kate Kovalik says students without literacy are lost. “Literacy empowers people to access information and the resources they need to live their lives,” she says.

After teaching poetry in Cranbrook’s Senior School, Kate surveyed students in her Year 7 class and found their interest in poetry was a ‘mixed bag’. “The feedback was mainly negative. Students thought poetry was pointless, old fashioned and boring,” she says.

Through Cranbrook’s Teacher Inquiry Group, Kate conducted research into whether teaching poetry with a more contemporary lens would increase interest and engagement. “Students are online, they are used to interacting in real time. I wanted to look at what would happen if we united our curriculum with some of those familiar experiences,” she said.

After watching the film *Whale Rider*, the Year 7 class then wrote a poem based on a character of choice’s perspectives. They then went online to Canva to publish their poem in a creative format as a multi modal piece with text, including symbolic images.

The class then published their poetry in class and were given real-time feedback, as they would on social media platforms.

To conclude her research, Kate had each student submit a voice recording of their experience. Analysis of this feedback found students enjoyed the process, saying the published poetry helped them build empathy for characters, was dynamic, and they enjoyed receiving real-time feedback in a format they were used to.

“It was great to see teenagers writing and enjoying poetry in a format that went beyond just words on a page,” she said. “I will definitely use this unit again. It worked well for an extension class, because it gave the students more agency and freedom. With some more scaffolding, we could re-work this unit to appeal to different groups of students as well.”

there are some great advantages to reading online. For those who are self-conscious about their reading level, an e-reader means that others cannot see the cover of the book they are reading. Digital versions of books also have in-built dictionaries to assist students in understanding the vocabulary. Being able to isolate lines of text can support dyslexia and other processing challenges. That being said, there is some research that would suggest that reading printed media is better for comprehension and critical thinking,” she says.

Megan Light, Digital Literacy Leader at the Junior School says leading children’s technology researcher and parent Dr Kristy Goodwin’s book, *Raising your child in a digital world*, provides research and practical tips that outline the seven essential building blocks of child development and explains how technology can both support and inhibit each of them. “Reading on screen and off screen both have benefits, particularly in the areas of relationships and attachment, language development and executive-function skills. Importantly, it’s how we balance and align technology to children’s developmental needs,” Megan says.

The Junior School recently renamed the library the iCentre. Megan says this reflects the physical and virtual spaces where students can be inquirers, imaginative, inspired, insightful, ideate, show integrity, use information technologies... “and the ‘i’ list goes on. The digital age is embraced rather than combatted. With the advent of digital media, our learners engage in multimodal reading, which includes reading text, images, videos, and interactive content online. Classroom teaching includes explicit instruction on these various semiotic systems. In context of inquiry and research, we take a balanced approach, where we firstly consider the purpose of the task and age group, and then make informed decisions regarding relevant sources and applications. Teaching and learning experiences are planned for students to develop the transdisciplinary skills that underpin thinking, research, and communication,” she says.

Megan says the iCentre’s print collection aims to include diverse voices and true representation. “We are particularly passionate about showcasing the work of First Nations authors and illustrators such as Greg Dreise, Kirli Saunders, Dub Leffler and Charmaine Ledden-Lewis. With an inquiry approach, we teach students to plan, gather and synthesise information from experts, books, observations, as well as online sources. This also has implications for the ways we develop and embed the critical information and media literacy skills across the programme of inquiry from Kindergarten to Year 6,” she says.

TIPS TO ENCOURAGE READING

Australian Children and Young Adults author Tristan Bancks recently spoke to Senior School students in the Packer Theatre. “The students were very engaged, asked good questions,” he says. “In my talks, I bring my writing journey to life using pictures, videos, music, maps, and personal anecdotes. This invites students into the story and gives them a good sense of whether the right book for them,” he says.

Tristan uses technology when writing his books for research and to find details. “I will ‘cast’ the characters by finding images of actors that I would want to play the character in a film. I will use Google Maps Street View or Apple Lookaround to explore locations for my story. I’ll watch YouTube videos of news stories related to my idea. I then use those artefacts to illuminate the story for students. I create a video book trailer and a soundtrack playlist for every book. Technology can be enormously helpful in the creative process,” he says.

Tristan says reading is incredibly important when writing creatively. “At best, the writing process feels like I’m reading a good book. I’m right inside the story and time disappears,” he says.

WHAT ARE YOUR FIVE TIPS FOR ENCOURAGING CHILDREN TO READ?

1. Let kids see you reading
2. Have books around the house and read together
3. Take kids to the library and bookstores
4. Play audiobooks in the car
5. Listen to what kids like to read and make it available to them while always providing other options to stretch them.

Maintaining a love of reading in the Junior School

READING IS VERY MUCH ALIVE in the Junior School, with 18,000 books and other items borrowed each year. Megan says borrowing is an expectation that becomes a habit. “Developing a love of literature is based on relationships. The connections we work on building and facilitating for our students are on three levels. The relationship between the reader and their peers, teachers and parents, the relationship between the creators and the reader, and of course, the book and the reader,” she says.

The library fosters a love of reading in the early years by celebrating books as friends and objects to cherish and enjoy. “One of our favourite display-based activities is inspired by the picture book, *The Lonely Book* by Kate Bernheimer. The Kindergarten to Year 2 students are encouraged to empathise with titles from our picture book collection that are feeling a little “unloved”. A mystery display of brown paper packages provides a powerful way to promote literature and reading as our friend,” Megan says.

One of Megan’s favourite Junior School experiences is the Black Out Pyjama Parties during Book Week, where students can cosy up in and read by torchlight in bookshelf beds. “We invite guest authors in to talk about



their books, because an author’s books and experiences directly correlates to an increased interest in students’ reading,” she says.

“The Secret Reader is another experience for students in Years 3-6. We invite a teacher to read and write reviews about new releases that are shared in Library sessions. The secret reader also includes personal clues and connections to the books in their reviews, slowly revealing their identity. The students loved it! And it got them interested in reading those books,” Megan says.

Megan works closely with Junior School Library Technician Elizabeth de Wit to interact with every student and teacher, every week. “Through planned learning experiences, activities, displays and conversations, we aim to inspire learning, reading and creativity. Being yourself and knowing the child is paramount, as is maintaining high expectations balanced with playfulness,” she says.

Encouraging teenagers to read

SENIOR SCHOOL ENGLISH TEACHER ANNA HITCHCOCK says the English Department continues the enthusiasm of primary school reading by giving students in Years 7 to 10 ten minutes at the start of every English lesson to read books of their own choosing, as well as a library lesson once a fortnight devoted entirely to reading for pleasure.

Anna says research suggests parent modelling of reading is one of the most impactful ways to encourage students to read. “When young people see the adults in their lives devoting time to reading for pleasure, leaving their own technology aside, and then talking about what they have read, students see for themselves that reading is both a worthwhile and lifelong activity,” she says.

Head of English Stephen Henriques says our students have never been so busy, which creates another barrier for reading. “Busy is good, yet, during downtime, we need to encourage our students to pick up a book,

rather than their phone or a video game controller. To combat the trend, we create a reading friendly environment, provide access to diverse reading materials in our fantastic library, and share recommendations of culturally relevant books in our end of term emails to students,” he says.

Encouraging students to read requires a combination of strategies that can make reading more engaging, relevant, and, most importantly, more enjoyable. To achieve these goals, Stephen says English teachers and Teacher Librarians give students short concise and engaging stories that “hook” a student into a world they have not experienced before. “Reading, despite being classed as an individual act, is an avenue into a social situation. By talking about a text and sharing our insights with each other, we become more social in a world in which we have become too immersed in our own devices,” he says.

“In any conversation with a student, I show interest in what they are reading, whether they are enjoying it and if they would recommend it. If they don’t like the book, that’s okay, as long as they give me a well-founded opinion and can justify their reasons. Conversations about reading are key to winning the battle,” he says.

Stephen also encourages adults to read in front of kids. “I’d encourage parents and children to read the same book together as it can strengthen relationships and provide a shared activity that can deepen a bond,” he says.

Anna says students need adults to indicate to them that time spent reading is valuable. “Often students are driven by what is right in front of them, their tech, and the gratification they receive from this immediate connection, in their minds, outweighs the longer-term benefits of reading widely - academic success across their subjects, improved employment prospects, and even health benefits,” she says. ■

CRANBROOK LIBRARIANS RECOMMENDED READING

Cranbrook’s librarians have a deep love of all literature, are widely read and are interested in a student’s interests, enabling them to suggest a wide range of books for their child. Here are some of the books they are currently recommending.

JUNIOR SCHOOL

The Wild Robot
by Peter Brown

The Little Wave
by Pip Harry

Grimsdon trilogy
by Deborah Abela

Rabbit Soldier, Angel, Thief
and *Waiting for the storks*
by Katrina Nannestad

The Wolf Wilder and
The Explorer by
Katherine Rundell

SENIOR SCHOOL

Monster by
Walter Dean Myers

Hatchet by
Gary Paulsen

Once by Morris
Gleitzman

The Boy at the Top of the Mountain by John Boyne

An Absolutely True Story of a Part-Time Indian by Alexie Sherman’s

A Monster Calls by Patrick Ness

The F Team by Rawah Arja

How Do You Live by
Genzaburo Yoshino

Car Crash by Lech Blaine

The Anthropocene
Reviewed by John Green

Dracula by Bram Stoker

Nineteen Eighty-Four by
George Orwell

Cry the Beloved Country
by Alan Paton

No Country for Old Men by
Cormac McCarthy

The Road and The Body
by Moray Dalton

Love that dog by Sharon Creech

Lenny’s Book of Everything
by Karen Foxlee

The Fantastic Flying Books
of Morris Lessmore by
William Joyce

