The Discourse of Reading Groups is an AHRC-funded project at the Open University, employing discourse analysis, corpus analysis, and ethnographic observation to investigate the social interactions taking place in face-to-face and online reading groups. The reading groups focused on meet in universities, secondary schools, houses, prisons, bookshops, libraries, and other public and private spaces, as well as a number of online contexts. Books were chosen by the groups themselves, with one additional book, The Great Gatsby, being read by all groups in order to maximise the possibilities for inter-group comparison.

By June 2008, this project will be nearing completion, and the SHARP conference will provide an excellent opportunity to disseminate results pre-publication and receive feedback from experts in the field of reader study. The proposed paper will report on findings regarding the project’s major research questions, discussing the relationship of individual utterances about literary works (‘responses’) to three intertextual fields: 1. the material text being read, including its ‘paratexts’; 2. the total sequence of utterances produced in the course of the same interaction; 3. the wider critical reception of the work. It will complicate the account of reader response by exploring the hypothesis that, far from being a free act of private decoding (de Certeau 1984) or an encounter between an ideal text and an individual personality (Holland 1975), response to text is subject to multiple determinations, beginning with the immediate social context in which the response is produced (Scollon 1998). The consequences of this hypothesis for methodology in the historical study of reading (eg. interpretation of entries in the Reading Experience Database) will be considered.

In common with other conference papers and publications arising from this project, the proposed paper will be jointly authored by all three researchers. It will be presented by one researcher on behalf of the group as a whole, but at least one of the remaining two researchers will be present to answer questions.