Socially- and culturally-oriented accounts of reading as social practice have tended to emphasise the local, contextualised construction of textual readings, including the ways these may be mediated by spoken dialogue (e.g. Maybin and Moss, 1992; Lillis, 2006). This raises the question of how such readings are produced, and how discursive textual interpretation is managed alongside everything else participants do as they talk – attending to social and affective aspects of group interaction, including the negotiation of particular identities and sets of relations between speakers/readers. Our analysis of reading group discourse suggests that there are clearly differentiated blocks of ‘literary’ and ‘social’ activity, but also more fleeting shifts between the literary and the social, requiring complex management of interactional frames (Goffman, 1974). Literary activity itself (discussion of plot, characterisation, imagery, style) provides a semiotic resource for the construction of reader identities and stances, and relationships between participants (hierarchical, democratic, friendly, oppositional). Literary readings are often warranted by an appeal to particular identity categories and personal experiences.

In seeking to understand such processes, the ‘Reading Groups’ project draws on the sociolinguistic analysis of language in interaction, supported by qualitative analytical software (Atlas-ti). This paper explores the potential of this combination of methods - how it may contribute to our understanding of the local construction of literary readings and reader identities.