Abstract

Reading groups (or book clubs, book groups etc) are of interest in their own right as a contemporary cultural phenomenon, but they also provide a valuable source of information on how ‘ordinary’ readers interact with print text. Until recently, however, reading groups have been relatively under-researched. Research that is available tends to be ethnographic, or survey-based. In this presentation I report on a project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council that looks more particularly at the discourse of reading groups – or how reading groups talk about books.

The project worked with 16 face-to-face and two online groups. Within this small sample we have tried to reflect some of the diversity of contemporary reading groups in terms of geographical distribution, gender, age and location of meetings (including, for instance, face-to-face groups who meet in members’ houses, a pub and a gay bar, bookshops and libraries, and institutions such as a school, workplace and prison).

Across this diverse set of readers and groups, we consider what groups talk about, but also how they work as communities of readers, and how they construct interpretations and evaluations of the books they have read. In the presentation I discuss some of this evidence, and also consider what a discourse analytic approach may bring to the study of readers and reading.