Introduction

The papers in this colloquium focus on everyday literary discussion or ‘talk about reading’: how readers construct interpretations of literary texts (both popular fiction and more canonical literature), and how such interpretive work, far from being ‘simply’ a literary activity, is also intimately bound up with readers’ identities and aspects of their everyday lives.

We take our evidence primarily from contemporary reading groups – people who come together to talk about a book they have read. Reading groups have been studied ethnographically (most notably Long 2003). More recently, the nature of reading group discussion has begun to interest discourse analysts (e.g. Allington and Swann 2009), providing a valuable site for applied linguistic research. In seeking to develop this area, colloquium papers adopt a broad approach to the conference theme of ‘impact’. Within the British Research Excellence Framework, ‘impact’ relates to the influence of research outside academia – something which the research reported in these papers demonstrates in various ways. All papers also address potential theoretical and methodological impacts of their chosen approach to literary reading and discussion.

Reading group discourse provides insights into popular argumentation. Papers variously explore the development of literary ideas and their embedding in social and interpersonal processes. Paper 1 (Peplow), for instance, builds on and further develops performative conceptions of identity construction, as well as the idea of Communities of Practice, often drawn on as a construct within sociolinguistics and applied linguistics.

Reading groups also provide a window on everyday literary reading/reception. A discourse analytic approach to this often stands in contrast to more widespread textual or experimental studies, but Paper 2 (Whiteley) argues for the combination of insights from discourse analysis, literary stylistics and cognitive poetics in the development of a socio-cognitive approach to reading/reception.

Reading groups are of critical interest as institutional phenomena, established in schools, workplaces, prisons etc and tied into certain perceived institutional, social, and personal benefits of literary reading and discussion. Drawing on interactional sociolinguistics, Paper 3 (Swann) considers one such initiative, exploring some of the practical and ideological tensions evident in the discourse of school reading groups.
Lastly, reading groups stand in relation to contemporary culture. Paper 4 (Allington) examines how reading groups associate themselves with or distance themselves from what sociologists call ‘legitimate culture’. It also asks whether there are inherent problems with using sociological research to inform discourse analysis, and with positioning discourse analytic findings as contributions to sociological research.

References
