Institution: The Open University
Unit of Assessment: D29 – English Language and Literature
Title of case study: Engaging the public in the History of Reading - The Reading Experience Database, 1450–1945 (RED)

1. Summary of the impact

The Reading Experience Database, 1450–1945 (RED), housed and developed at The Open University (OU) is the world's largest database about reading habits. An online, open-access project with more than 30,000 entries, it has transformed public understanding of the history of reading. RED is democratising scholarship about the history of reading by encouraging members of the public from any location to contribute and use information about readers through history. More than 120 volunteers from outside academia have already contributed some 6,000 entries. RED attracts more than 1500 users each month from more than 135 countries and has inspired and provided expertise for partner projects in Australia, Canada, the Netherlands and New Zealand.

2. Underpinning research

Derived from accounts of reading from a wide variety of sources, the fully searchable RED has provided the material and tools for constructing a history of reading within Britain and beyond. The wealth of data gathered by our open online contribution method is generating the primary material for answering our research questions: Who was reading? What were they reading? Where were they reading, and in what circumstances? The data gathered on RED is fundamentally transforming the rapidly growing academic field of Book History, with scholars of histories of reading, as well as many researchers in related fields, citing RED as an indispensable primary source [3.1–3.6 and 5].

The ideal of democratising research into the histories of reading has guided every stage in the evolution and expansion of the project. This applies both to the collection of research data and its dissemination: volunteers from the public gather a significant percentage of the evidence of reading experiences for the database, and the database in turn provides the best way of collating and disseminating information about reading experiences to the widest possible audiences.

In the REF period, RED was led by W.R. Owens, professor in English at the OU, up until his retirement in 2011, and then by Shafquat Towheed, lecturer in English at the OU since 2007 to date. RED does however have a long history preceding 2008. The project was initiated at the OU by Simon Eliot and W.R. Owens in 1995 (http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/RED/redback.htm). The award of an Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB) fellowship allowed the creation of:

- a customised hard copy data collection form

- the appointment of a research associate (Stephen Colclough) for five years to create a location register and gather a substantial body of primary data

- the creation of a closed, internally housed database.

The next step was to digitise data, disseminate findings and engage with new and existing research questions in the history of reading in a three-year research project, 'The Reading Experience Database, 1800–1945' (AHRC, 2006–2009). The project was led by Owens (PI, OU) with Eliot (Co-I, IES London) and Mary Hammond (Co-I, OU), and two postdoctoral RAs, Crone (OU) and Halsey (IES).

This project constructed and populated an online, open access database, gathered additional data, and hosted a three-day international conference. With many contributions from non-academic volunteers, the data entry target of 25,000 entries over three years was exceeded. An international

conference in London organised by the OU members of RED, 'Evidence of Reading: Reading the Evidence' (21-23 July 2008), was attended by more than 160 delegates from more than 20 countries, and research outputs included 3.1–3.4.

The latest stage in enhancing the research resources generated and disseminated by RED was enabled by another 12-month AHRC project 'Developing an International Digital Network in the History of Reading: Collaboration between the UK RED and invited partners' (AHRC, 2010–2011). Led by Owens (PI) with Towheed (Co-I) and Crone (Co-I), it established research and development collaborations with four international partner RED projects. The UK software was made available to these new partners, and a systematic, easy-to-use search function was developed to allow users of one RED to search across all the others. The attractiveness of RED to international, non-academic user-groups was enhanced in several ways: a new web interface; the provision of online teaching material; production of new promotional material; and expanded engagement with social media.

3. References to the research

Research outputs:

1. Towheed, S and Owens, W.R. (eds) (2011) *The History of Reading, Volume 1: International Perspectives, c. 1500-1990*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

2. Halsey, K. and Owens, W.R. (eds) (2011) *The History of Reading, Volume 2: Evidence from the British Isles, c.1750-1950*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

3. Crone, R. and Towheed, S (eds) (2011) *The History of Reading, Volume 3: Methods, Strategies, Tactics*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

4. Towheed, S., Crone, R., Halsey, K. (eds) (2010), *The History of Reading* (London: Routledge.

5. Colclough, S. (2007) *Consuming Texts: Readers and Reading Communities, 1695-1870*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

6. Hammond, M. (2006) *Reading, Publishing and the Formation of Literary Taste in England, 1880-1914*, Aldershot: Ashgate.

Research grants:

- 2006–2009: £292,108 awarded by AHRC Resource Enhancement to Owens for a project entitled 'The Reading Experience Database, 1800-1945'.

- 2010–2011: £100,778 awarded by AHRC-DEDEFI to Owens for a project entitled 'Developing an International Digital Network in the History of Reading: collaboration between the UK Reading Experience Database and invited partners'.

4. Details of the impact

RED has democratised the scholarship of reading. It has taken research into reading beyond academic circuits and created a resource that depends upon the input of many members of the public to gather research data and to participate in the production of new research. It is comparable to the 'citizen science' projects that have proliferated in recent years.

More than 120 volunteers have contributed a fifth of all entries (*c.* 6000 items) in the database, making RED the largest single repository of publicly sourced, unsolicited and voluntarily contributed information about readers and reading in the world. Volunteers can follow their own personal interests (such as the reading habits of their favourite writer), or enter information from reading diaries of an ancestor in their own family papers. They receive guidance and training from

RED project members, and develop expertise in handling and interpreting documentary sources.

The open nature of the online contribution entry system means that RED can support unsolicited volunteers based anywhere in the world. This form of crowdsourcing generates supportive and symbiotic contact between members of the public and publicly funded academic research. The contributions of volunteers have generated new research questions, including PhD projects, and a number of scholarly publications.

Feedback from the volunteers indicates that their cultural lives have been enriched by working with RED. One volunteer records, 'I enjoy research that captures glimpses of unsung lives. The RED project does that very well. It is anti-abstruse, like a good biography.' Another volunteer's comments capture the inclusive and democratic ethos of RED, as she reflects, 'It's good that interested "amateurs" like me can get involved in areas of research which interest them.' A third volunteer attests to how RED is transforming public understanding of the history of reading when she notes, 'it has made me more aware, in a more immediate way since it is based on *individual* reading experiences that non-academic readers often read exactly the same kind of works as so-called "élite" readers'[5.5]

Reports in the mainstream media of RED's achievements recognise its impact on the cultural lives of both volunteer-contributors and of members of the public exploring the database. James Macgowan in *The Ottawa Citizen* [5.4], for example, quotes Simon Eliot's claim that RED will contribute to answering major research questions, such as how 'books are read [and] who reads which books', but he also captures the popular appeal of RED by immediately adding, 'Well, OK, but I say it's just plain fun'. Jennifer Howard in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* [5.3] emphasises how RED has helped 'push the field [of Book History] along', especially since 'the database moved online [and] they've thrown it open to crowdsourcing, asking volunteers to contribute records'. Like Macgowan, Howard stresses the pleasures all readers or users can discover in browsing the RED database. As she observes, 'Roaming through such material brings the experiences of past readers alive'.

Other institutions with a mission to engage the public in arts and humanities research have been inspired by the example of RED. For example, Bethan Ruddock sees RED as a model training and outreach tool to be used by librarians and archivists in order to engage all library-users. In *Ariadne. Web Magazine for Information Professionals*, she concludes, '[RED] is a fantastic resource, and deserves the support of the community' [5.1]. The British Library has also embraced RED, including it in its '100 Websites to Capture the Digital Universe', and describing it as 'essential reading for future generations researching our life and times in 2013' [5.2].

RED continues to grow apace, and its positive impact upon the cultural lives of its volunteers and non-academic users will grow accordingly. The numbers of volunteers are expanding as the RED partner projects in Australia, Canada, the Netherlands and New Zealand gather momentum, and a further cohort of volunteers is being recruited for the Listening Experience Database (LED), an AHRC-funded project (£750k, 2013-18) based directly upon RED and run by the Open University Music Department and the Royal College of Music.

Usage of RED by has increased year-on-year, with Google analytics data indicating that the number of unique visitors to the website has increased from an average of below 1,000 per month in 2010 to more than 1,500 per month in 2013. RED has reached many non-academic users, with evidence of continuing engagement via social media (for example, by February 2012 RED had been mentioned or listed in some 4,210 instances in the blogosphere, largely in personal blogs [5.6 and 5.7].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

Public Institutions, Industry, Government

1. Ruddock, B. (2011) 'RED's utility for librarians and archivists', *Ariadne. The Magazine for*

Web Professionals, 4 July, http://www.ariadne.ac.uk/issue67/reading-exp-db-rpt

2. Featured on the British Library Curators' list of the top 100 Websites ('Capturing the digital universe'), http://www.bl.uk/100websites/top100.html

Mainstream media

3. Howard, J. (2012) 'Secret lives of readers', *Chronicle of Higher Education* (USA), 17 December 2012 http://chronicle.com/article/Secret-Reading-Lives-Revealed/136261

4. Macgowan, J. (2009) 'Wilde about books', *The Ottawa Citizen* (Canada), 26 July, http://www2.canada.com/ottawacitizen/story.html?id=355395e1-cf3d-4d02-8cf6-674f039bcec9

Feedback from RED volunteers

5. Interview with RED volunteer Sophie Bankes, http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/reading/UK/explore_contributing.php#recentvolunteer

Blogosphere

6. 'Reading and readers through the ages', *The Reader Organisation*, 24 September 2007, http://thereaderonline.co.uk/2007/09/24/reading-and-readers-through-the-ages

7. 'Reading Experience Database, 1450–1945', Senior Common Room, 12 February 2011, http://senior-common-room.blogspot.co.uk/2011/02/reading-experience-database-1450-1945.html