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## Reading Coaches for a 40 Book Challenge: Creating an Online Reading Community to Support Sixth Graders' Independent Reading

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### **Cover Page Footnote**

The authors are grateful for support from Central Michigan University's Honors Program and English Department that provided funding for books to support the Reading Coaches program.

# Reading Coaches for a 40 Book Challenge: Creating an Online Reading Community to Support Sixth Graders' Independent Reading

by Amy Carpenter Ford, Kayla Szymanski, Isabel Slate, and Rachel Derusha



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No one can deny the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the learning environment. Educators, students, and families struggled to adapt to outbreaks, to shifted learning modalities, and to new ways of learning while raising concerns about students' social, emotional, and mental health, especially for remote learners (Institute of Education Sciences, 2022). As a society, we are still reeling from the pandemic's effects, but we must refuse to repress these memories and instead, reflect on what we have learned, focusing on any positives that may have emerged from our collective experience by renewing an appreciation for in-person schooling, technological innovations, and attention to students' mental health.

Dr. Ford observed the impact of the pandemic firsthand on her daughter Charlotte, who transitioned from fifth grade at a cozy elementary school to sixth grade at a larger middle school for the 2020-2021 school-year. At the middle school, families had the option of online learning or a hybrid face-to-face format with an abbreviated school-day of core classes that ended at lunchtime, daily electives that were held online in the afternoon, and Wednesdays entirely online. Stu-

dents were social-distanced and masked, so there was less social interaction and talking than there normally would have been. The school's architectural layout itself was well-designed for COVID safety and to minimize spread; these actions probably saved lives. However, the combination of the hybrid format, shortened class periods, and the need to provide instruction for both online and face-to-face students left little time for independent reading. Furthermore, opportunities for talk and social interaction were limited, including conversations around books.

As a routine instructional practice, independent reading increases the volume and range of texts students consume, develops the fluency and comprehension skills that make reading more enjoyable, and launches readers on a journey toward greater understanding of themselves and the world (National Council of Teachers of English, 2019). Through independent reading, students build the stamina for mental challenges required to access increasingly complex texts and sustain their engagement in, and enjoyment of, reading (McVeigh, 2019). As a stamina-building

exercise, independent reading held the potential to counter unhealthy effects of students' over-reliance on cell phones and social media that developed during the pandemic (PBS Newshour, 2021).

Well aware of the value of independent reading, Charlotte's sixth grade teacher, Mrs. Rachel Derusha, sought a way to foster students' love for reading beyond the time and space of the physical classroom. Prioritizing the twin goals of maximizing volume and building stamina, Mrs. Derusha ambitiously instituted a "40 Book Challenge" (Miller, 2013). The 40 Book Challenge encourages students to read 40 books from various genres throughout the school-year and motivates them through personal challenge and choice rather than assignments or grades (Miller, 2014). However, time and talk—two critical components of the 40 Book Challenge—were in short supply in the classroom, so conversations that would have once been face-to-face interactions were replaced by written reading inventories, reading logs, and genre reports.

Due to these significant changes, students' engagement in the program became threatened. In fact, Charlotte, an avid reader, was resistant to filling out reports. "I can read 40 books, but I can't fill out 40 of these sheets!" she moaned. "They take all the fun out of reading." Charlotte already struggled on a daily basis to complete online assignments as part of the hybrid format; she lamented, "this is just one more thing."

As Charlotte's mom, Dr. Ford was concerned that her daughter was at-risk of becoming a non-reader at a time when her sixth grader was already clinging to normalcy by a thread during remote teaching and learning. To motivate Charlotte's reading life (and get her to fill out those book reports), she engaged Charlotte in conversation about characters, literary qualities, and what to read next. As a university-based teacher educator, Dr. Ford saw the value of these informal reading conferences for her daughter and wondered how her own class of secondary English teacher candidates, who were simultaneously missing out on their face-to-face clinical experience as Reading Coaches, might support the 40 Book Challenge.

## **Reading Coaches Program**

In normal times, the Reading Coaches program at Central Michigan University (CMU) gives youth the opportunity to read and talk about books as part of a community of readers. Over the years, the program has adapted to meet the needs of multiple school sites. Whether it's been extra-curricular, after-school programs or co-curricular as part of a class, at the middle or high school level,—and, more recently, face-to face or virtual—the goal has always been to foster a love of books, promote independent reading, engage students through choice, and cultivate lifelong reading habits. Reading Coaches, who are English teacher candidates, learn how to motivate readers, serve as reading role models, and conduct reading conferences in preparation for orchestrating their own reading workshop (Hudson & Williams, 2015; Kittle, 2013; Miller, 2010; 2013).

To adapt the Reading Coaches program for the online and blended learning environment, Dr. Ford drew from ideas for remote teaching and learning generated by the Chippewa River Writing Project's webinar series (2020) in which seasoned Michigan educators shared their knowledge and experience as they adapted to pandemic teaching. These webinars inspired Dr. Ford's vision of how video-based platforms could be utilized for reading conferences to support students' independent reading.

## **Virtual Reading Coaches**

With the addition of virtual Reading Coaches, the 40 Book Challenge was transformed from written genre-based reports that were completed at home into an online reading community with multiple options for participation. Virtual reading conferences via Zoom allowed sixth graders to have synchronous, real-time conversations with Reading Coaches during the online portion of the blended learning experience. Video conferences via Flip (formerly, Flipgrid) afforded students an asynchronous option: students could post a video talking about their books and a coach would respond with their own video.

The relevance of this online version of Reading Coaches

endures beyond the pandemic-related social distancing and shifts to online learning. Studying the program’s design and impact provides us with an in-depth look at how a reading community can extend beyond the physical classroom by using digital platforms that engage students in reading and in talking about books. While the program may not be 100% replicable for all teachers or teacher educators, the descriptions offered in this article can enhance implementation of independent reading programs, strengthen reading communities, and maximize students’ engagement in reading, all the while offering resources for English and literacy teacher education.

In what follows, we describe how CMU adapted the Reading Coaches program to a pandemic-induced online and blended learning environment and, at the same time, fostered a virtual reading community to promote sixth graders’ independent reading. First, we explain how we launched the 40 Book Challenge and introduced Reading Coaches. Next, we show how we designed the Flip and Zoom video conferences to maximize choice, engagement, accessibility, inclusion, and community. After that, we present evidence of students’ participation and engagement in the program. Finally, we offer teachers concrete considerations for how they might adapt the model to support independent reading in their own classrooms.

**Launch of the 40 Book Challenge with Reading Coaches**

To motivate and engage students, an independent reading program needs to be introduced with intentionality in order to accomplish multiple goals that emphasize the value of reading, student choice, book selection, organization and diversity of the classroom library, and the routines that will support reading (Parker, 2022). Mrs. Derusha launched the 40 Book Challenge with a “book tasting” café (McVeigh, 2019) that allowed students to browse and select books of their choice from her extensive classroom library. After modeling her own process for choosing books, she conferenced with students and guided them to explore the back cover in addition to the title and front matter. Foregrounding their interests, she drew on her knowledge of students’ reading habits and experiences gleaned from an interest survey. Mrs. Derusha would never tell a student they can’t read a book, even if she suspects it might be out of reach for their reading level or background knowledge; instead, she explains they can abandon the book, and if they do, it helps them find a better fit.

Mrs. Derusha compiled the list of books her face-to-face sixth graders chose for the launch of the virtual Reading Coaches program (See Table 1). The list includes a variety of texts: fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary, prose and verse, graphic novels and book series, complex texts and comfort reads.

Table 1  
*Books Chosen by Sixth Graders for the Launch of Reading Coaches*

1	<i>A Travelers Guide to Mars</i> (William K. Hartmann)
2	<i>A Wrinkle in Time</i> (Madeleine L’Engle)
3	<i>All the Wrong Questions Book 3 - Shouldn’t You be in School?</i> (Lemony Snicket)
4	<i>Allies</i> (Alan Gratz)
5	<i>American Chillers Book 11: Poisonous Pythons Paralyze Pennsylvania</i> (Johnathan Rand)
6	<i>Amulet Book 5: Prince of the Elves: A Graphic Novel</i> (Kazu Kibuishi)
7	<i>Amulet Book 2: The Stonekeeper’s Curse: A Graphic Novel</i> (Kazu Kibuishi)
8	<i>Born a Crime</i> (Trevor Noah)
9	<i>Breadcrumbs</i> (Anna Ursu)

10	<i>Brown Girl Dreaming</i> (Jacqueline Woodson)
11	<i>Catching Fire: The Hunger Games Book 2</i> (Suzanne Collins)
12	<i>Child of the Dream</i> (Sharon Robinson)
13	<i>Crossover</i> (Kwame Alexander)
14	<i>Diary of a Minecraft Zombie: When Nature Calls</i> (Zack Zombie, aka William Peña and Matthew Peña)
15	<i>Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Cabin Fever</i> (Jeff Kinney)
16	<i>Diary of a Wimpy Kid: The Deep End</i> (Jeff Kinney)
17	<i>Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Old School</i> (Jeff Kinney)
18	<i>Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Wrecking Ball</i> (Jeff Kinney)
19	<i>Diary of a Wimpy Kid: The Last Straw</i> (Jeff Kinney)
20	<i>Doll Bones</i> (Holly Black)
21	<i>Dork Diaries Book 1: Tales from a Not-so-Fabulous Life</i> (Rachel Renée Russell)
22	<i>Emily Windsnap and the Monster from the Deep</i> (Liz Kessler)
23	<i>Everything, Everything</i> (Nicola Yoon)
24	<i>Five Chimneys</i> (Olga Lengyel)
25	<i>Ghost</i> (Jason Reynolds)
26	<i>Good vs. Evil Book 2: A World Without Princes</i> (Soman Chainani)
27	<i>Among the Barons</i> (Margaret Peterson Haddix)
28	<i>Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone</i> (J. K. Rowling)
29	<i>I Funny - A Middle School Story</i> (James Patterson)
30	<i>I Survived the Shark Attacks of 1916</i> (Lauren Tarshis)
31	<i>I Survived the Sinking of the Titanic</i> (Lauren Tarshis)
32	<i>Is it Night or Day?</i> (Fern Schumer Chapman)
33	<i>Journey to the Center of the Earth</i> (Jules Verne)
34	<i>Lord of the Rings - Fellowship of the Ring</i> (J. R. R. Tolkien)
35	<i>Lost in the Antarctic: The Doomed Voyage of the Endurance</i> (Lost #4) (Tod Olson)
36	<i>Michigan Chillers Book 1: Mayhem on Mackinac Island</i> (Johnathan Rand)
37	<i>Mystery at Lake Placid</i> (Roy MacGregor)
38	<i>On the Road to Mr. Mineo's</i> (Barbara O'Connor)
39	<i>Out of My Mind</i> (Sharon Draper)
40	<i>Reached</i> (Ally Condie)
41	<i>Sherlock Holmes: A Study in Scarlet</i> (Doyle)
42	<i>Shiloh</i> (Phyllis Reynolds Naylor)
43	<i>Siege the Storm</i> (Leigh Bardugo)
44	<i>Sink or Swim</i> (Steve Watkins)



45	<i>Sisters</i> (Raina Telgemeier)
46	<i>Sure Signs of Crazy</i> (Karen Harrington)
47	<i>The 39 Clues Book 1 - The Maze of Bones</i> (Rick Riordan)
48	<i>The Alien Moon</i> (Alex Milway)
49	<i>The Bootlace Magician</i> (Cassie Beasley)
50	<i>The Boy in the Wooden Box</i> (Leon Leyson)
51	<i>The Fault in Our Stars</i> (John Green)
52	<i>The Fourth Stall</i> (Chris Rylander)
53	<i>The Goose Girl</i> (The Books of Bayern, #1) (Shannon Hale)
54	<i>The Hunger Games</i> (Suzanne Collins)
55	<i>The Last Kids on Earth &amp; the Nightmare King</i> (Max Brallier)
56	<i>The Report Card</i> (Andrew Clements)
57	<i>The Science of Breakable Things</i> (Tae Keller)
58	<i>The War of the Worlds</i> (H.G. Wells)
59	<i>The Witches</i> (Roald Dahl)
60	<i>Troublemaker</i> (Andrew Clements)
61	<i>Warriors: A Vision of Shadows #2: Thunder and Shadow</i> (Erin Hunter)
62	<i>White Bird: A Wonder Story</i> (R. J. Palacio)
63	<i>Who is George Lucas?</i> (Pamela Pollack and Meg Belviso)
64	<i>Who is Malala Yousafzai?</i> (Dinah Brown)
65	<i>Who Was Rosa Parks?</i> (Yona Z. McDonough)
66	<i>Wings of Fire #1 - The Dragonet Prophecy</i> (Tui T. Sutherland)
67	<i>Wings of Fire #8 - Escaping Peril</i> (Tui T. Sutherland)

Mrs. Derusha viewed her classroom library as essential for independent reading because of its convenience and accessibility for students who have limited access to books at home; moreover, she applied for grants, used her own money, and checked out high-interest books from the public library to ensure her library reflected the array of interests and cultural diversity of her student population and also served to expand students' horizons with different perspectives and new experiences (Germán, 2021; Miller & Sharp, 2018; Parker, 2022; Williams & Kortlandt, 2021). For fully online students, the Epic digital library was available through a school-wide subscription purchased during the pandemic (n.d.). Mrs. Derusha made screencasts to guide

all students through the process of completing the 40 Book Challenge log and to show them when and how to access Zoom and Flip for virtual conferences with Reading Coaches, all as part of the routine of independent reading.

Students were assigned to participate in conversations with the Reading Coaches. These conversations were offered but were not graded. Instead, Dr. Ford set up a record-keeping system that would allow Mrs. Derusha to track students' participation and provide individualized instruction as needed. For Zoom conferences, Reading Coaches completed a Google Form that generated a connected Google Sheet with an "at-a-glance

Table 2  
*Reading Coach Roles and Responsibilities*

<i>Coaching Roles</i>	<i>Role</i>	<i>Responsibilities</i>	<i>Resources</i>
<i>Coach</i>	Conduct the conference	Posing questions, listening to student responses to take-up their ideas, naming and praising the student's reading habits and skills.	Conference Guide
<i>Record-Keeper</i>	Record student responses	Listen closely to capture students' words and ideas	Google Form aligned to Conference Guide
<i>Chat Monitor</i>	Foster a reading community	Added to the conversation by providing information about the books, authors, and recommendations.	Zoom Chat and Internet
<i>Peer Feedback Provider</i>	Give feedback to coaches	Observe the conference, take notes, help the coach improve their instructional practice	Notes

snapshot” of sixth graders’ conversations about books. Likewise, Flip generated spreadsheets that tallied video responses, linked to individual videos, and included the transcribed versions of students’ speech. These conference records enabled Mrs. Derusha to track students’ participation as well as to trace the reading life of individual students, and the records informed her own face-to-face conference check-ins conducted once or twice per week.

### **Zoom Virtual Conference Design**

Virtual reading conferences allowed students to drop in to Zoom and talk with Reading Coaches for one hour, two days per week during the online portion of the school-day and for 45 minutes during English Language Arts (ELA) time on “online Wednesdays.” Coaches assumed one of four roles during Zoom conferences and often moved fluidly between the roles: coach, record-keeper, chat monitor, and peer feedback-provider (See Table 2).

These roles and responsibilities required coaches to be mentally present and alert, to listen attentively, and to respond authentically. Preparation and practice were imperative. English teacher candidates analyzed videos of reading conferences, read Kittle’s (2013) *Book Love* and other professional texts, observed Dr. Ford’s

modeling, role-played with each other, and considered the concept of “textual lineages” to recommend texts for Black adolescent males and other students of color (Parker, 2022; Tatum, 2005; 2009). (See the end of the article for QR Codes linked to Reading Coaches training materials.)

As part of her Honors Capstone project, Reading Coach Kayla Szymanski collaborated with Dr. Ford to develop a Conference Guide with questions drawn from Kittle (2013) in order to cultivate students’ reading lives, teach reading strategies, and challenge students to read widely. Specifically, the questions fostered students’ genre awareness, navigated them through elements of a story, tracked their confusion, and prompted metacognition, evaluation, and reflection (See Figure 1).

The questions applied to all types of literary genres, were broad enough that they could be adapted to wherever students were in their book and were intentionally sequenced, although coaches needed to be able to deploy them fluidly as part of the conference to make it flow like a conversation. The guide allowed each conference to have structure and spontaneity, and coaches were encouraged to use it, but they could also ask students probing questions that emerged authentically in the conversation.



1. What is your name?
2. What book did you read? Who is the author?
3. What kind of book is this?
4. When does the story take place? Where does the story take place?
5. Tell me about the main character(s). What are they like?
6. What was the main problem that the main character(s) faced? How was it resolved?
7. How did the main character(s) change throughout the book?
8. How do you think the book will end?
9. How long did it take you to finish it?
10. Was this an easy read or a hard read for you? Why?
11. Were there any parts or things about the book that are/were confusing to you? What did you do to make the book less confusing?
12. How much did you like this book on a scale of 1 to 10?
13. Would you recommend this book to a friend or family member?
14. Is there anything else you want to tell me about this book?
15. Name and praise a skill, strategy, or reading habit.

*Figure 1. Conference Guide for Virtual Reading Conferences via Zoom (Derived from Kittle, 2013)*

According to our observations, one question that was particularly engaging for students involved making predictions about the ending (Figure 3, number 8). By asking students to hypothesize what might happen next in the text, coaches then elicited students' reasoning with evidence from and about the text. Another engaging topic that students discussed during reading conferences was how students rated the book (Figure 1, number 12). After ascribing a rating, they explained what they liked, what they disliked, and what they would change in the text. Coaches encouraged the sixth graders to be confident in their opinions and to see themselves as readers with valuable insights on the book. They also validated students' emotions such as excitement or frustration and made each conference interesting and dramatic. Positioning students with competence and confidence was central to cultivating students' reading identities in Reading Coaches' conferences with students (Parker, 2022).

At relevant points throughout the conference, coaches applied Serravallo's (2019) approach to "Compliment Conferences." These conferences are designed to praise students' reading skills, strategies, or habits. Per conference records, coaches praised readers for making predic-

tions, using evidence from the text to describe setting and characters, explaining features of a genre, rereading to clear up confusion, and persevering through challenging books or parts. During Zoom conferences, these points of praise were recorded by Reading Coaches in the Google Sheet that was provided to the teacher (See Table 3).

Virtual reading conferences held in Zoom offered students real-time interaction; to complement these sessions, Flip offered the flexibility of asynchronous conversations.

### **Flip Video Conference Design**

Flip (formerly Flipgrid) is an online tool for teachers to create "Groups" to facilitate video discussions. For her Honors project, Reading Coach Isabel Slate collaborated with Dr. Ford to design the Flip Group. Within each Group, a "topic" is similar to a message board where teachers can post prompts and students can record their responses. Before configuring the Flip platform, however, we created and organized the content with the criteria for that the Group that included accessible academic language and thought-provoking questions, engaging topics to cultivate students'

Table 3

*Sample of Conference Records Google Sheet*

1.Book Title/ Author	2.Genre	3.Progress	4.Why Chosen	5.Setting	6.Characters	7.Problems & Predictions	8.Praise	9.Difficulty	10.Confusion	11. Rate
Grenade Alan Gratz	Historical Fiction	Beginning	Interested in topic.	United States during World War Two	Two soldiers		Telling plot	medium		
Stella By Starlight Sharon Draper	Historical Fiction	Middle	Thought it looked like a cool book and had met the author.	Klu Klux Klan era	Stella is the main character	Race and the Ku Klux Klan	Making personal connections to her own life	difficulty low but topics tough.	historical background	9
Ghost Jason Reynolds	Realistic Fiction	Beginning	Recom- mended by Reading Coaches	Glass Manor in New York	Castle Crenshaw. poor neighbor-hood; not afraid to speak his mind; sometimes does things without thinking	Ghost's dad tries to kill him and his mom, coach helping him	Persistence through difficult topics	medium but emotional topics	emotional read	10
The Hunger Games Suzanne Collins	Dystopian and Futuristic	Done	Saw movie	Panem, futuristic city	Katniss Everdeen	Reaping, Hunger Games	fast reader, great story reteller, passionate about reading this book	y/a middle school level	setting and details different in book vs. movie	7
War Stories Gordon Korman	Historical Fiction, Realistic Fiction	Beginning		unknown but headed to france	jacob and great grandchild	father of child doesn't like grandfather from hate due to the war	maintaining multiple timelines	easy		9
Ghost Hunters	Horror and Spooky Stories, Mystery	Middle	The mystery aspect	A little boy's haunted house	A 7 and 14 year old boy.	Ghostly encounters and paranormal activity.	interests in books and excitement for the book.	easy	Twin characters played a switching prank, didn't know which one was which. Took notes on characters.	9
Little Women Louisa May Alcott	Classics	Middle	Tried a few times, can finally understand language		Jo, Dr. Ford		perseverance reading the book	medium	Some of the language and vocab has been confusing.	8
Brian's Winter Gary Paulson	Action and Adventure	Beginning	Read Hatcher previously Second book in a series	Canada, wilderness, Winter	Brian	Starvation, freezing, loss of food	Making predictions, identifying setting and conflicts	easy		8
Smile Raina Telgemeier	Graphic Novels, Realistic Fiction	Middle	Cover looked interesting	School, dentist's office, and home	Raina	Raina fell and had to get fake teeth, friend problems, boy problems	Great explanations, making connections with character's problems and personality	easy		10

*Compiled through a Google Form and Aligned with the Reading Coaches Conference Guide*

identities as readers within a community, and inclusive, student-friendly, visually appealing graphics to create a learning environment akin to social media interfaces.

We began by identifying instructional goals and generating topics and questions aligned with those goals (See Table 4). Guided by Gallagher & Kittle's (2018) "Questions to Navigate a Story," Ms. Slate initially organized the topics as the parts of a story: "Exposition," "Rising Action," "Turning Point," and "Resolution." To make them more accessible for sixth graders, we simplified the terms to beginning, middle, and end to draw upon a framework familiar from elementary school. "Exposition" became "Beginning of My Book," "Rising Action" became "Middle of My Book," "Turning Point" and "Resolution" became "End of My Book." We selected some provocative questions, such as "What trouble is brewing?" and adapted others such as "How are the characters dealing?" Inspired by Gallagher & Kittle's (2018) "Track Your Thinking" Form, we added a topic called "Tracking My Thinking" to prompt students' metacognitive reflection and allow them to ask questions if they experienced confusion or struggled with their book. Mrs. Derusha identified this metacognitive topic as especially important for teaching sixth grade readers when she reviewed and approved all of the questions.

To hook students immediately at the point of entry into the Flip, we added a topic where students could introduce themselves, get comfortable with the technology, and explain why they chose their book. Titled "Hello, I am...and I chose this book," the topic invited students to share their name, pronouns, book choice, and "something we should know about you." Finally, we added a topic called "Reviewing My Book" so that students could reflect on their reading life and recommend books for their peers. With these topics, the Flip discussions became a starting point for students to learn about literary elements, develop their reading skills, and sustain their reading lives as they contributed to the Flip Group as an online reading community.

After transferring the topics and questions into Flip, Ms. Slate went to work designing the interface so

it would be predictably structured, welcoming, and inclusive with a positive vibe that would appeal to sixth graders (See Figures 2.1-2.6.) Each topic included clear directions for when and what to post in the topic. Each topic also featured a list of questions students could choose from in their responses with directions emphasizing that they could answer one question... or try them all. This "Challenge by Choice" approach empowered students with the autonomy to choose their degree of participation so that Flip felt like less of a requirement. To make the questions visually appealing and easy to read, Ms. Slate used colorful emojis versus bullet points and high interest GIFs.

Ms. Slate devoted special attention to representation to create an inclusive online environment (See Figures 2.1 - 2.6). For instance, the GIF in the first topic that served as students' entry point featured a hand waving and the word "hello" in different languages (See Figure 2.1). The topic "Tracking My Thinking" featured the meme of Roll Safe, a Black character from an urban-culture mockumentary, tapping his head as if he's just thought of something smart (Feldman, 2017) (See Figure 2.4). "Reviewing My Book" presented white actor and comedian Jason Sudeikis with the caption, "I don't know why I'm getting emotional," something he often says in his comedy (See Figure 2.6). Other GIFs included Professor Dumbledore from the Harry Potter Series (See Figure 2.5), a cute cat turning the pages of a military science book (See Figure 2.2), and the character Sam from the television sitcom *iCarly* reading a book and exclaiming, "These things are great! It's like TV in your head!" (See Figure 2.3).

Before the Flip went live, Reading Coaches posted their own videos in which they modeled how to respond to the Topics and questions to clarify expectations and begin building rapport. They scripted and rehearsed before recording to ensure that their ideas were clear, language was accessible, and tone was conversational in a concerted effort to embody reading role models within the reading community. (See a template without student responses, removed due to privacy, here: <https://flip.com/e661d1b3>) and in the Flip Video Demo QR code below.

Table 4

*Flip Planning Tool: Topics, Questions, and Instructional Purposes*

<i>Topic</i>	<i>Questions</i>	<i>Instructional Purpose</i>
Beginning of My Book	Tell us about the characters. Who are they? How are they connected? What connections are you making with them? Where are the characters? What kind of place is this? What trouble is brewing?	Analyze first impressions; make predictions; identify characters, exposition, and setting; foreshadow conflict
Middle of My Book	How are the characters dealing? What is changing? What obstacles are coming up? What are you looking forward to?	Analyze conflict, rising action and turning points
End of My Book	How did the characters change? What did they learn? How have their relationships changed? How will life go on (or not)?	Understand conclusion, analyze character development and themes
Tracking My Thinking	Is this a hard read for you? Why/why not? What is the author trying to tell you? Was there a time that you were confused? How did you push through and keep reading?	Reflect metacognitively, clear up confusion, ask questions, teach reading strategies, gauge understanding of themes, lessons, messages
Hello, I am ...and I chose this book	Tell us about yourself. What book did you choose? Why did you choose it? What is something we should know about you?	Build rapport, get comfortable with technology, begin monitoring reading lives
Reviewing My Book	Was this an easy or a hard read for you? Who should read this book? Why? Was this book similar to or different from books you've read before? What is this book missing that you wanted more of?	Make recommendations, reflect on reading life, increase challenge

*Derived from Gallagher & Kittle (2018) and Kittle (2013)*

By analyzing Flip video transcripts, we pinpointed which Flip questions prompted the most responses (See Table 5). Specifically, we used key word searches to find where students took up the specific language from the

questions in their videos, such as when students said, “This character is dealing with...” in their response. Students were most engaged in discussing characters and providing recommendations. In their videos, they

Flip Group Design Figures

Hello, I am...and I chose this book

We are excited to learn with you on Flipgrid!

In your video, share:

- What is your name?
- What pronouns do you use? (she, he, they)
- What book did you choose?
- Why did you choose it?
- What is something we should know about you?



Figure 2.1. Flip Topic 1: Introduction to the Reading Community

Tracking My Thinking While Reading

Use this forum at any time during your reading!

Directions: Choose a few questions to guide your discussion in your video. You can choose just one or try to answer them all! We use the saying "Challenge by Choice" to empower YOU to decide the extent of your participation.

- Is this a hard read for you? Why/why not?
- What is the author trying to tell you?
- Was there a time that you were confused? How did you push through and keep reading?



Figure 2.4. Flip Topic 4: Tracking Thinking

Beginning of my Book

Use this "Topic" to make a video after reading the beginning of your book.

Directions: Choose a few questions to guide your discussion in your video. You can choose just one or try to answer them all! We use the saying "Challenge by Choice" to empower YOU to decide the extent of your participation.

- Tell us about the characters. Who are they? What do you think of them?
- How are the characters connected?
- What connections are you making with the characters?
- Where does the story take place?
- What kind of place is this?
- What trouble is brewing?

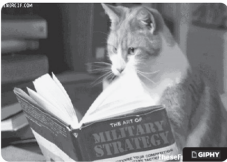


Figure 2.2. Flip Topic 2: Beginning the Book

End of my Book

Use this forum after you've finished your book. Congratulations on making it this far!

Directions: Choose a few questions to guide your discussion in your video. You can choose just one or try to answer them all! We use the saying "Challenge by Choice" to empower YOU to decide the extent of your participation.

- How did the characters change? What did they learn?
- How have their relationships changed?
- How will life go on (or not)?



Figure 2.5. Flip Topic 5: End of the Book

Middle of my Book

Use this forum after reading about 2/3 of your book.

Directions: Choose a few questions to guide your discussion in your video. You can choose just one or try to answer them all! We use the saying "Challenge by Choice" to empower YOU to decide the extent of your participation.

- How are the characters dealing?
- What is changing?
- What obstacles are coming up?
- What are you looking forward to?



Figure 2.3. Flip Topic 3: Middle of the Book

Reviewing my Book

Use this forum after you've finished your book and are ready to talk about it as a whole. Congratulations on sticking with it!

Directions: Choose a few questions to guide your discussion in your video. You can choose just one or try to answer them all! We use the saying "Challenge by Choice" to empower YOU to decide the extent of your participation.

- Was this an easy or a hard read for you?
- Who should read this book? Why?
- Was this book similar to or different from books you've read before?
- What is this book missing that you wanted more of?
- How did this book make you feel? What emotions did you have while reading?

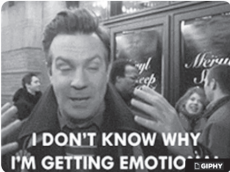


Figure 2.6. Flip Topic 6: Reviewing the Book for the Reading Community

Table 5  
Most Responded-to Flip Questions

Topic	Most Engaging Question
Beginning of My Book	Tell us about the characters. Who are they?
Middle of My Book	How are the characters dealing? What is changing?
End of My Book	How did the characters change?
Reviewing My Book	Was this an easy or a hard read for you? Who should read this book?



talked about the characters' relationships and experiences. They were also eager to provide recommendations, very detailed information about the challenge their book presented to them (especially due to length), and specific ideas about the appropriate age for the book's audience.

We contend that the intentionality with which we designed the Zoom and Flip virtual conferences to maximize accessibility, engagement, inclusion, choice, and community resulted in a fairly high level of participation in the Reading Coaches program overall, as evidenced by quantitative and qualitative survey data presented in the results section below.

### Participation in Reading Coaches by the Numbers

For four months (February-May, 2021), Reading Coaches conducted virtual reading conferences in Zoom and held Flip video conversations around books chosen by the middle schoolers. During that time, approximately 75 students participated in the program, and 66 responded to a survey administered at the end of the school year. The survey included questions related to students' participation, engagement, and reading habits and solicited feedback about the program.

#### Students

We asked students "How many times did you attend Zoom conference? Post videos to Flip?" Of the 66 students who responded to the survey, 64 reported participating in virtual conferences: 41 attended at least one Zoom conference, and 52 submitted at least one Flip video (See Table 6). Notably, 26 students tried each platform at least once to determine their preference before choosing one or the other. Only four out of 66 students did not engage in either type of conference, but of those four, three students acknowledged viewing peers' Flip videos. We view this as a high rate of participation and engagement, especially in the context of the pandemic.

#### Conferencing Platforms

During February-June, coaches recorded conference records for 129 Zoom conferences with sixth graders

Table 6

*Total Student Respondents that Participated in Reading Coaches Conferences (NOTE: The total number of participants is more than the 66 students who participated in the survey because some students engaged in both Zoom and Flip video activities.)*

<i>Number of Times the 66 Students Participated</i>	<i>Number of Students that Attended Virtual Zoom</i>	<i>Number of Students that Submitted Flip Videos</i>
One	13	7
Two	6	5
Three	5	12
Four	4	6
Five	2	10
Six	2	5
Seven	5	2
More than Seven	4	5
Total	41	52

(though, we believe this figure is understated due to inconsistent record-keeping resulting from coaches' attendance and technological issues.) In the Flip group, sixth graders created a total of 297 videos. This distribution of participation across platforms suggests that both options were valuable and necessary. One student especially appreciated "the wiggle room or the choice" as the element they liked best about the program.

#### Total Books Read

As a class, students reported reading a lot of books (See Table 2). During the school-year (September-June), they estimated they read 1089.5 total books. During the Reading Coaches program (February-June), they reported reading 503 books, roughly 46% of the entire school year's total (while students may have perceived an incentive to over-state the number of books they read, we cross-checked a sample of students' estimates with their Flip and Zoom records, and their estimates



seemed plausible and reliable.) Notably, 7 of the 66 students (about 11%) met the 40 Book Challenge and 6 of the 66 (about 9%) came close with 30-39 books read for the year, for a total of about 20% of students meeting the challenge.

When asked about the impact of the program on their reading habits, 27 of 66 students (40%), reported they read more books as a result of Reading Coaches. Given the importance of volume and stamina, we celebrate this self-reported increase in the number of books read. For the 60% or 39 of 66 students who reported they did not read more as a result of Reading Coaches, it is possible that the program had no effect at all, or merely sustained students’ existing reading habits.

We also asked students: “How many books did you read during the school-year September-June? During the Reading Coaches program February to June?” The vast majority of students, 48 out of 66, or about 73%, read 1-9 books during Reading Coaches (February -June) and 39 out of 66, or about 59%, read 5-19 during the school-year (September-June), as noted in Table 8.) Recognizing that 40 books might have been too ambitious for some readers, especially during the pandemic, Mrs. Derusha conducted individualized goal-setting conferences and quick check-ins with students if their participation in Reading Coaches lagged.

Table 8  
*Total Number of Books Read*

<i>Number of Students</i>	<i>September - June</i>	<i>February - June</i>
40+	7	2
30-39	6	1
20-29	3	2
10-19	18	9
5-9	21	18
1-4	8	30
0	3	4

**Participation as Documented in Students’ Own Words**

Given that students did not receive a grade for their participation in the Reading Coaches program, what motivated them? To answer this question, we coded and categorized students’ responses to the open-ended survey question: “What was the best thing about Reading Coaches? What did you like most?”

“My favorite thing about reading coaches was that it was a place to talk about books and it was one of the best experiences with this crazy year,” said Skyler (pseudonym), a student who dropped in to Zoom conferences three times per week, nearly every week, and responded in Flip when she couldn’t Zoom. Her schooling experience was entirely virtual, and Reading Coaches was a lifeline for her. Hearing the positive impact that Reading Coaches had on Skyler in her own words is humbling and gratifying, and students’ perceptions are a powerful source of evidence to inform the design of comparable reading communities.

Overall, students reported they appreciated the individualized attention and feedback, particularly the ways in which coaches asked them questions and helped them with their reading. They also liked that coaches made them feel seen and heard. Finally, for some students, it may have been the subject matter of books, the digital medium, or the socialization of a reading community that motivated their participation.

**Individualized Feedback**

Students also valued the individualized attention they received, particularly the ways in which coaches asked them questions and helped them. Many remarked that, in Zoom conferences, coaches took their time to speak with and listen to each student, without rushing, to give them the attention they needed: “I liked how they were very into the books that others were reading, and they took the time to conference a lot of people” and “I liked how everyone had a turn in Reading Coaches. Everyone who attended got a conference and every coach who could [be present during the appointed times] got a conference.” Flip participants

liked how coaches reacted and responded to all their videos and asked lots of questions about their books, because “they ask you questions individually.”

### Help with Reading

Seven students remarked that coaches helped them with reading in various ways, such as by helping “me get more into the book,” by helping “with books and comprehending them,” by providing them “with better ways to describe the book [I’m] reading,” and by assisting them “to try to find a word that is hard to me and find a definition for it.” One student remarked, “I never knew some of the things that they showed me.” The rapport that coaches built with students also made a difference. Several students remarked about how nice, kind, and passionate their coaches were.

### Talking about Books

For some students, it was the opportunity to talk about books specifically that drew them to Reading Coaches. They liked the fact “that I could talk to people that enjoy books like I do,” “how we talked about the books we read together,” and “that it kinda pushed us to read more books.” This positive feedback about Reading Coaches points to the value of a reading community as a particular kind of collective experience—especially in an online environment—that gathered for the purpose of supporting independent reading.

### A Reading Community

Students benefited from listening to others talk about their books and receiving recommendations about what to read next. Indicative comments included:

- “I liked watching all my friends’ Flips to see what they like reading and maybe in the future I will read one of their books.”
- “How I could talk about the books I was reading, read, and how I got recommendations for books.”
- “I got recommendations about authors I should read books from.”
- “People type in the [Zoom] chat books that might interest you.”

Students received recommendations from both peers and coaches. “When I was in the [Zoom], other kids explained what books they were reading such as *Brian’s Winter* and an FNaF [*Five Nights at Freddie’s*] book.”

Another student “got suggested *Frankenstein* because I am reading *Little Women*, which is an older book, and I said I liked fantasy. So my reading coach at the time combined them into historical fantasy.” One student remarked that they “got the recommendation *Refugee* from the Reading Coaches”—as did two others—and another said, “I am thinking about reading the rest of the Jason Reynolds’ ‘Track’ series.” Familiar with the power of contemporary young adult literature (Germán, 2021), coaches pushed diverse books and authors.

### Feeling Seen and Heard

Many students valued their Reading Coaches for making them feel seen and heard. Responses included, “It’s someone to talk to,” “How they were so attentive,” “Getting to tell someone that will listen about my book,” and “I like that they were paying attention.” For students whose learning experience was 100% online, the interaction through Reading Coaches was a lifeline in the midst of social isolation: Skyler, for instance, seemed to read a book each day so she’d have a new text to share with coaches, and another student said, “I liked that I could talk to someone because I’m alone all day.” One student appreciated that the coaches were strangers, indicating the value of expanding the reading community beyond the classroom.

### Digital Platforms

Overall, students liked “being able to talk about my book and not just writing it down.” One student appreciated reading without being seen. For at least seven students, the medium of Flip was especially appealing. They liked “doing the Flips” and “recording a video.” Other students valued the way Flip allowed coaches to respond: they commented, “I got to speak about my book and someone would respond” and “I loved how real college people would watch and tell us how they liked our book” For another student, Zoom conferences were more appealing: “I think the best thing was being able to get a response more directly than a pre-recorded video.”

## Recommendations for Program Improvement

Overwhelmingly, the experience seemed to be positive and well-received. In addition to asking what students liked, we also sought feedback on what might be improved. Students who completed the survey also offered insight as to what could be improved about Reading Coaches. When asked what they did not like or would change, half of them (33 of 66) explicitly stated there was nothing they did not like or to change nothing, 17 left the answer blank, and 16 provided actionable feedback. These students wanted more opportunities to participate, more book recommendations, and more regular communication. Other students would change features of the digital platforms.

When asked what they would change, five students wanted more opportunities to participate in Reading Coaches. Three students wanted more opportunities to participate beyond the three days/week offered during the online portions of the blended learning experience: “What I dislike about Reading Coaches was not about the talks at all, but how many times a week we did them. I wish we could have done them more often and for example 5 days a week. (Just a suggestion!)” Additionally, two students wanted coaches to provide more book recommendations.

Students also requested more frequent and prompt communication. Four students asked for more reminders about when Reading Coaches were available and notifications when coaches responded to Flip videos. Two students asked for coaches to respond more promptly on the Flips.

Despite our attention to making the online learning environment as welcoming as possible, some students remained uncomfortable with the platforms. Four students were uncomfortable with making Flip videos:

- “I can’t make videos for other people cause its weird.”
- “I didn’t like that other kids could see my video (I don’t know if you can change that).”
- “We have to talk online and people can see it.”

- “Having to be so detailed and having to make videos on Flip.”

Two students were uncomfortable with the group nature of the virtual Zoom conferences; they did not like “That it was not one on one and it was a whole bunch of people listening,” and “Waiting for my name to be called” in the group Zoom sessions.

One student reminded us of the value of the written option, saying they would “rather write a response about my book I’m reading.” Another student felt that the program, despite all our efforts, still compromised the pleasure of reading: “I don’t really like having to talk to someone about reading, I prefer to read to read.” (Mission accomplished!?!)

## Post-Pandemic Reading Communities

Sixth graders’ own words remind us how vital it was during the pandemic, and how important it continues to be, that teachers attend to students’ social, emotional, and mental health so that all students feel seen and heard (Institute of Education Sciences, 2022). For students who participated in Zoom, Reading Coaches provided someone to talk to who would listen to them, and for some, it was talk about books that they enjoyed as compared to simply enduring for school purposes. Individual reading conferences keep kids from disappearing (Miller, 2013), and during the pandemic, quick check-ins helped teachers connect with each student (Mattesich, 2021). In today’s classrooms, teachers can incorporate five-minute reading conferences (Serravallo, October 2019) as part of the routine instructional practice of independent reading, prioritizing students who need the most attention and support (Parker, 2022) as Mrs. Derusha did.

For other students, the Reading Coaches program’s appeal was making videos and socializing with peers in an online community. Both Flip and Zoom presented opportunities to help students overcome their discomfort with technology and to cultivate their digital literacy skills as content creators. During the pandemic, teachers were forced to utilize new online tools to deliver content. With intentional planning grounded

in a digital literacy framework, teachers can capitalize on these digital platforms to cultivate students' authentic literacy practices in today's classrooms (Turner & Hicks, 2022).

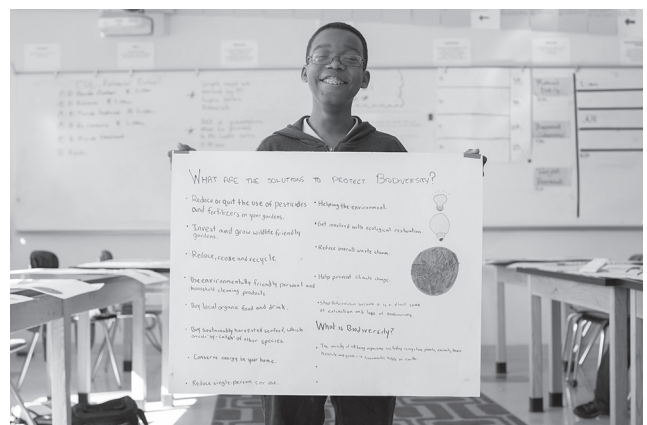
Students were eager for book recommendations from peers and coaches, and the reading community built through the online platforms, supplemented by face-to-face check-ins, afforded conversations about book selection. Infusing texts with diverse authorship, experiences, and perspectives into the community is critical to increase their circulation of those texts. For K-12 teachers interested in expanding a reading community beyond the classroom, we offer the Zoom Conference Guide, Flip design, and record-keeping system as tools to build on (See Appendix for a QR code linked to Reading Coaches materials.) Based on student feedback, we recommend aligning the guide and group with familiar curricular frameworks, emphasizing the range of choices that are offered, establishing regular routines for communication, and conducting goal-setting conferences with readers along the way. A reading community could include a variety of members, such as aspiring teachers, as Reading Coaches does, or cross-grade-level collaborations. A community could also be broadened beyond ELA to include cross-disciplinary discussions that explore relevant current events through historical or science fiction genres and themes of social transformation (Germán, 2021).

Emerging research and anecdotal evidence shows the pandemic disrupted learning, resulted in learning loss, and exacerbated economic inequalities (Lohman & Wilkinson, 2022). Throughout the Reading Coaches program we were mindful that we may be reproducing gaps in pre-existing disparities between students who identified as readers and those who did not, between those with established reading habits and those who lacked key resources of time, space, technology, and texts to read independently and participate in Reading Coaches while at home. The role of the classroom teacher in reaching out to students who were online, absent, or struggling was vital. In this sense, teachers truly are essential workers. Now that classroom time and space have (largely) been restored in the new,

endemic era, it is crucial for all students to have access to instructional support, time, and space for independent reading while at school.








Even Charlotte, surrounded by overflowing bookshelves at home, is vulnerable to becoming a non-reader: for five months during sixth grade, Reading Coaches animated her reading life. Sadly, since then, her habits and motivation have tapered off without independent reading as a routine part of the school day.

This article is a plea to teachers to preserve, rekindle, and/or ignite the joy of choice-based independent reading in this post-pandemic environment. This means that we must be active in resisting the pressures of addressing learning loss with "skill and drill" exercises. Remediation can strip the pleasure out of reading, make it a chore, and sever students from their literate identities; instead, all students—especially students who have been deprived of independent reading the most—deserve time for reading and talking about texts of their choice to build skills, stamina, habits, and connections within a reading community (Parker, 2022). As educators and policy-makers debate how to address declining test scores in reading (Lohman & Wilkinson, 2022), the lessons learned from pandemic-driven innovations, such as this version of the Reading Coaches program, have the potential to promote independent reading with a renewed sense of purpose as we strive toward our collective healing as a community.





## Appendix

<p>Training Materials and Question Banks</p> <p>Penny Kittle's Workshop Handouts on Conferring (<a href="https://bit.ly/3V5A2L7">bit.ly/3V5A2L7</a>)</p> 	<p>Reading Coaches Materials</p> <p>Conference Guide ("View Only" Google Doc) (<a href="https://bit.ly/3G0nMH0">bit.ly/3G0nMH0</a>)</p> 
<p>Gallagher &amp; Kittle (2018). "Track Your Thinking" and "Questions to Navigate a Story" (<a href="https://bit.ly/3hDSHQ1">bit.ly/3hDSHQ1</a>)</p> 	<p>Record-Keeping Tools (<a href="https://bit.ly/3WmXq7Y">bit.ly/3WmXq7Y</a>)</p> 
<p>Training Videos Playlist (<a href="https://bit.ly/3WGZeJd">bit.ly/3WGZeJd</a>)</p> 	<div> <div> <p>Flip Video Discussion Demo (<a href="https://bit.ly/3HNLEiF">bit.ly/3HNLEiF</a>)</p>  </div> <div> <p>Reading Coaches Materials (Google Drive Folder) (<a href="https://bit.ly/3W8zWU9">bit.ly/3W8zWU9</a>)</p>  </div> </div>

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## Author Biographies

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