



## The Power of Conversation: My Journey with Literature Circles

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### ABSTRACT

Emphasizing the value that social experiences bring to reading, this article explores the power of conversations surrounding reading, and how those discussions inspire meaningful engagement with books. A former fourth grade teacher shares her experience of implementing Literature Circles in her classroom, in a lower socio-economic, rural area, in the hopes of providing a student-centered, yet structured environment for open, encompassing discussions of books. Students in the study not only thrived with Literature Circles, but created their own, original roles for the process as well. This study draws the conclusion that Literature Circles instill a true sense of independence and cooperation in the quest to find authentic, aesthetic reading experiences for students, while providing several opportunities for compelling, reflective discourse.

### Introduction: The Power of Conversation

It is impossible for me to escape the lingering, warm images of Grandma reading to me on a fluffy, pink blanket. With sharp detail, I can also recount sitting at a wooden miniature table in nursery school with my scribe, my beloved teacher, who sat patiently writing for me, as I dictated fantasies from my imagination so that the words could magically appear on the page, for me to draw the accompanying illustrations. When I reflect on my reading experiences as a child, the moments are not isolated, passive instances. Instead, my childhood reading experience was a true continuum of meaningful interaction. In fact, as research supports, I believe that in both my childhood and adulthood, it has been the power of the conversations surrounding literature experiences that have been so rewarding, as opposed to the lone act of reading itself (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000).

After all, reading is not a skill to be acquired, as some have traditionally upheld (Yagelski, 2000). Reading is a multi-textured piece of our identities, affecting us in extremely social ways. Granted, there are certainly times when reading is a silent, individual event. However, we cannot deny the

obvious value a social experience can bring to reading, bringing a book alive with questions, wonder, and solicitation of emotion. To this day, I may not remember a given plot in a story, a character's name, or a poignant metaphor from a classic tale. What I do remember are the questions I had for my grandmother, giggling with her, the feeling of the wool blanket we sat upon, chatting for long moments with my nursery school teacher, the smell of the paste we used to bind my self-authored books, and the pure elation of simply talking about books with my mother. It was those authentic experiences that made me want to read and write.

Literacy is a social activity. In order to understand literacy development, we must understand the social conditions in which people engage in literate activity (Johnston, 1992, p. 8). Students establish and shape their literacy in social interaction. To really understand literacy, we need to describe the social contexts of literacy learning -- the interactions and how the student contributes to those interactions (Johnston, p. 8). Numerous scholars have contended that collaborative literacy experiences promote peer interaction and engagement in learning (Gambrell, Anders Mazoni, & Almasi, 2000).



The type of interaction that occurs during collaborative literacy experiences may play an important role in shaping students' perceptions of the purposes and goals of reading and writing" (Gambrell et al., p. 119).

Many current beliefs in the field of education pertaining to the social aspects of learning are attributed to the work of Vygotsky (1978). Vygotsky illustrated that social interaction shapes intellectual growth. Sociocognitive theory emphasizes the significance of language in the development of thought. This theoretical lens supports that collaborative learning has a great deal to offer in the area of literacy development with regard to providing rich occasions for creating classroom cultures that fortify students' thinking and engagement with text. In collaborative literacy experiences, students have the opportunity to co-construct knowledge and comprehension, communicate meaning, and develop higher-level skills, such as metacognition, decision making, memory, etc. (Gambrell et al., 2000).

As I began my teaching career, I really wanted to immerse my students in aesthetic reading experiences and student-centered pedagogy. Just as any beginning teacher, I wanted to instill a pure love of reading and a surge in emotional connections to texts, with students meaningfully engaged in conversation. Yet, as we all well know, there are constraints in what we affectionately term the daily grind, such as general classroom management issues, vast differences in ability levels within a given classroom, and unrealistic, inappropriate standards which overwhelm the most well-intentioned teachers. Indeed, some studies have indicated that teachers with the most admirable of intentions have not successfully implemented practices they had envisioned, without necessarily realizing it. Marshall, Smagorinsky, and Smith (1995) found that in the classroom discussions they observed, several of the sampled teachers' classroom discourse did not resemble the visions the teachers had articulated. Rather than the student-centered dis-

cussions the teachers felt were occurring, researchers instead found that teachers controlled the flow of the discussions, with an average of teachers' turns talking lasting two to five times longer than the students'. Their classroom discussions were largely based on summaries of textual information or interpretations of the details of texts, rather than global or emotional issues related to the reading of the text (Marshall et al.).

With an awareness of such research and the common constraints that have the capacity to limit us, I attempted to provide the same authentic experiences with literature for my 4th grade students that had inspired my love of literacy activities. In an attempt to be a reflective teacher, I asked myself questions such as: *How can I facilitate truly authentic, reflective questions and meaningful conversations surrounding literature for my students, without running the risk of being long-winded or out of the range of their interests? How can I encourage each child to contribute to a conversation in an evocative, purposeful fashion? How can I furnish genuine choice and a student-centered atmosphere for literature discussions that still instills some sense of structure?* Hefty questions, yes. But with patience, reflection, modeling, and natural trial and error, I empowered my students to engage sincerely with books, with our experiments in Literature Circles (Daniels, 1994).

### Literature Circles

Literature Circles grew out of the keen insight and pure dedication of exemplary teachers' work. Although some may perceive Literature Circles as a fancy term for book discussion groups, they are in fact much more than that. Created to promote student-initiated, high-order discussion, Literature Circles were designed with different, pre-established roles to enable students to "surface and independently discuss important topics of their own, rather than march through typical teacher-supplied study questions" (Daniels, 1994, p. 3). With each student having a clearly defined role within a small group of three to five people, students have numer-



ous opportunities to construct meaning through conversation, carefully listen, and frequently share. Such capabilities are possible especially because the design of the group lends itself to a certain degree of responsibility and investment on the part of each student. Although the thought of pre-established roles may sound contrived to the student-centered teacher, it is actually the only bit of structure needed to empower students to successfully and equally engage in literature with very little facilitation required of the teacher in a very student-centered way. Some of the designed roles, with names such as Discussion Director, Literary Luminary, Connector, Illustrator, Summarizer, and Vocabulary Enricher, give each student a unique voice in their group (Daniels).

Essentially, the reason I was so anxious to implement Literature Circles with my 4<sup>th</sup> grade students was because its format and premises encompassed all of the pedagogy in which I believe. Literature Circles adhere to student-centered, global, aesthetic, cooperative reading, while providing the structure needed within that holistic practice to promote truly powerful conversations surrounding books. Each child, regardless of ability level, has the opportunity in a Literature Circle to relate personally to a text and express that in a reflective context. In addition, Literature Circles promote independence, both in reading and in discussion. Yes, I was skeptical and unsure at first. Of course, it sounded too good to be true! However, utilizing Literature Circles with 4<sup>th</sup> graders has been my most rewarding teaching experience. When executed with dedication and thoughtfulness, Literature Circles can be *that* good!

### My Journey With Literature Circles

My experience with Literature Circles was in a public elementary school, located in a rural, farming, lower socio-economic area of southern Vermont. Although the student population is very homogeneous in terms of ethnicity, many of the students in this particular school are seen by the teachers as having the same types of social and economic problems that are normally associated with

urban areas (such as little support from home, low parental involvement in school, low scores on standardized tests, and high populations of students identified for special services).

My journey with Literature Circles began with the selection of small groups. I approached this process in several different fashions throughout the course of the year. Some strategies are admittedly better than others; I tried to balance my approaches, for that reason. Sometimes, students would be in self-selected groups, based on their choice of book, when presented with several titles. Frequently, this did work, and the groups were rather heterogeneous. However, there were times when obvious constraints arose, such as when students would purposely pair up to be together to read the same book, without regard for the book. Other times, I would pre-design and assign my own heterogeneous groupings with students I thought would work well together, based on personality and reading level. There were times when I would pre-establish groups that were more homogeneous in nature, too. Heterogeneous groupings, however, seemed much more beneficial to students of lower ability, by eliciting more fluent conversations, and more balanced modeling by the higher ability students. In instances where I organized the groups, students still had opportunities to choose the piece of literature their group would read, usually through a vote or consensus.

Literature Circles are truly a process. An earth-shattering conversation in a meeting tends not to occur immediately. Just as with any other thread of education, a successful Literature Circle will not happen overnight. As Harvey Daniels (1994) earnestly shares:

So here's the most important warning of all: wait. Don't panic. It will take hold in time. No educational change is ever instantaneous. Complex changes take even longer... Changes this large require some transition time, and you better be ready to live through it. (p.176)

A particularly striking realization for me was how my students just expected the answers and



questions to come from me. How dare I challenge them to think! One of my most vivid, cherished memories of implementing Literature Circles was when one of my students turned to me and said, with a very thoughtful expression, "You really get us to *think*. When I'm with you, I really *think*. It's not like that with (some) other teachers." The rest of the students in the group heartily agreed. Although my student's comment was a great compliment for me, it was with mixed feelings, of course. This is profound food for thought in the field of education. In fact, I see it as a call to action for all of us.

So, with intense investment, I trudged forward with my implementation of Literature Circles. Once small groups had been established, I introduced the roles of Literature Circles by handing out a description of each job. In small groups, we read through the descriptions of the roles, and discussed each one. As we discussed, we shared ideas and I modeled examples of how a given role may be approached. Rather than giving the students pre-designed role sheets, I instead presented each student with a blank folder to decorate and label as "Literature Circles Folder." Inside each folder were blank sheets of paper, of various sizes and colors. Each student was instructed to place his or her name, date, and role at the top of each sheet, as he or she began to work on a given role. Each day, roles were randomly selected by drawing from a hat. If a student chose a role he or she had already played in the duration of a particular book, then the student would draw again. This procedure ensured that each student had the opportunity to experience each role during the reading of a given text. I found this hat process to work well.

Of course, there was some degree of confusion surrounding the idea of roles at first, but with time, the Literature Circles ran much smoother. I made it clear to my students that *they* would be leading the discussions, and that I would merely be observing and facilitating. Although some of the first meetings did not go as well as I would have hoped, seeming sort of mechanical in nature, I found that in time, the students rather gracefully became more

fluid, and even passionate in their discussions. Groups met approximately every other day, which left time for students to either read independently or in partners, and prepare their roles for the next day's Literature Circle.

Questions are the most essential component of Literature Circles, because they are the basis of the entire discussion, so it was therefore an absolute necessity that I model for my students the intricacies a question can involve. As both research and common sense tell us, the art of questioning is vital to understanding and reflection (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000). Questions launch us forward and can enable us to derive deeper meaning from a text, allowing ensuing conversation to be broadened and contextualized. Perhaps the most valuable lesson for my students and me was the important distinction to be made between large global questions and smaller clarification questions within a content. Borrowing a technique I had encountered in an expository text, I decided to term questions as "thick" or "thin" with my students (Harvey & Goudvis). After just a couple quick weeks, my students were powerfully differentiating between thick and thin questions, which in turn, greatly enhanced their discussions. My students learned to ask and label thick questions as larger questions, addressing universal concepts, and thin questions as those primarily asked to clarify confusion, understand words, or access objective content (Harvey & Goudvis). For example, many students went from asking questions such as, "What did the main character see first?" to asking more global questions, such as "Would you have approached this problem in the same way the main character had? Why or why not?"

Frequently following Literature Circle sessions, I would check in with my students to see how *they* felt the process was going. I had many positive feelings regarding their progress, but I wanted to know what they thought. So, I often asked questions such as: "How do you think it's going? Are you finding Literature Circles to be fun and of value? What could we do to improve? What is going particularly well?" I was pleased and proud



of their reflective answers, which were nearly all positive. One of the most constructive realizations they made was the efficacy they had discovered with thick questions. Most students saw the deep potential of the thick questions enriching their discussions. For almost all of the students, I was assuming it was one of the first times they realized the essence of an authentic question. They expressed the love of knowing there was no right or wrong answer with a thick question, and that thick questions usually required longer, involved, further discussion and research.

What I found particularly striking while facilitating my students' Literature Circles was their very obvious intellectual growth. Often times, the students would ask questions or bring up an attribute in a given story that I had never even noticed. Leafing through my personal teaching journal from last year, I found the following quote: "Their progress is so noticeable. Sometimes they say something and I am astonished because I hadn't even thought of that or *even* noticed that!" Of course, I was aware of the fact that I learned an immense amount from my students, but moments like those made it especially apparent.

### Time for Reflection

In order to illustrate some of the claimed intellectual growth experienced by my students, I will offer samples of written questions and reflections from particular students. In December, I collected the students' Literature Circles folders to assess their progress. Students' questions tended to be fact-based, as opposed to larger, global questions. While flipping through their papers, I was faced with numerous questions that were evaluative in nature, with one answer in mind, such as: "What was the name of his dog?" or "Why did she run to the train station?" Although such questions do demonstrate comprehension and inference within the text, and the questions were derived from the students, I was disappointed in the lack of more open-ended, global questions, simply because the different types of questions evoke different kinds of

thinking. Both types are needed, yet one type was really lacking. I immediately decided to model the use of global, "thick" questions. In addition, I engaged the students in subsequent discussions about the value of "thick" questions.

Also dispersed among the papers of the December folders were written reflections the students had assembled, in response to questions I had asked them with regard to various aspects of our progress in Literature Circles. Ryan wrote: "Overall, I pretty much like Literature Circles. I like picking jobs. Except, there are jobs I really like, like Discussion Director and Illustrator, but I hate Literary Luminary and Summarizer." Mandy reflected: "This is fun because we get to do all the talking. The ideas come from us. It's weird when certain kids come to the Circle, and they're not really prepared enough. Because then like next time they come to the table more prepared, because they could totally tell they weren't prepared enough the first time. That's good." Brad shared: "Literature Circles are definitely cool because it's more fun to read when you do this. I think that some jobs are more fun than other jobs. Can we make up our own jobs?"

Quite notable were the students' experimentations with creating their own, novel roles for Literature Circles. In May, during another routine collection of the students' folders, I recorded their written reflections again. I could not help but notice their marked improvement in the quality and breadth of their questions and written reflections. Moreover, for months I had witnessed a continual improvement in the quality of their conversations. Generally speaking, children's enthusiasm is unmistakable; when my students were given the authority to construct their own roles and global questions within a variety of texts, they blossomed.

Although there were still fact-based questions in their conversations and folders, there were also "thick" questions such as: "Why do you think he stole the money? How did you feel when Maddie talked about her father dying? Which part in this chapter made you the most angry, and why? Would



you have approached this problem in the same way? Everybody always says how she is such a lovable character- why is she like that for you?"

As may be expected, those types of questions provided a solid foundation for more in-depth discussions of aesthetic responses to literature. In fact, I felt that the questions themselves were evidence of affective responses to the text. Sighs, wide eyes, gasps, and giggles were also evidence to me that engaging conversations were happening. These topics mattered to them, were derived from them, and stimulated them.

In students' written reflections on their progress in Literature Circles, I found that they, too, were aware of their own journeys. Susan wrote: "Making up our own jobs was so cool! Every kid in 4<sup>th</sup> grade should be able to do that!" Ted shared: "We talked about important stuff. We didn't just talk about like what each character did. We talked about stuff that matters." On a poignant note, Kate wrote: "I know this might sound stupid or dorky or something, but Literature Circles were special for me because it got me to think about and talk about my Dad and how he left us. In the last book we read, that girl reminded me so much of me, and how her mom got hurt so much. By reading that book and talking about it, I learned a lot about life."

### New Roles In Literature Circles

As a teacher, one of my utmost goals for my students was for them to experience and establish a certain degree of independence. I felt that Literature Circles enabled them to attain the true spirit of independence in terms of reading and discussing many genres of literature; they purely enjoyed books on their own, and exhibited engagement in the conversations surrounding the books. Notwithstanding those examples, what stands out to me as being one of the students' grandest accomplishments in independently pursuing Literature Circles was their suggestion to me that they develop their own roles. They no longer wanted to strictly adhere to the pre-established roles I had given them. I was whole-heartedly impressed! *The stu-*

*dents' willingness to not only pursue, but sculpt the roles of Literature Circles was my clearest evidence that they were active, engaged participants in a powerful way, that would enhance future conversations surrounding literature.*

Literature Circles were designed with specific features in mind. When I implemented Literature Circles, I upheld most of these key features, including: students choosing their own reading materials; small temporary groups being formed; different groups reading different books; groups meeting on a regular schedule; students using written or drawn notes to guide their discussions; discussion topics coming from students, meetings being natural and open conversations about books; students rotating their roles; teacher as facilitator; and a spirit of fun and playfulness pervading the room (Daniels, 1994). Much to my delight, my students did thoroughly enjoy Literature Circles, and there was indeed a climate of fun in the room during Literature Circles. This spirit is what I believed prompted their quest to form new roles for their continued enjoyment. I felt that my students' enthusiasm and appropriate extension of activities really signified a deep understanding and appreciation of Literature Circles.

Several of the students had expressed disinterest in the Summarizer role. Therefore, they created an Illustrator/Summarizer role. Since the illustrating role is such fun, they decided to combine the two jobs into one, using long strips of paper to illustrate a sequence of events to share with the Circle. Other students, who also did not like the role of Summarizer, designed a role called Summarizer Game Leader. The Summarizer Game Leader was to write a summary of the assigned reading, but rather than simply share the summary, he or she would instead lead a cooperative game among the Circle members to see if they could recount the major points of the reading. In addition, there was the newly created Drama Summarizer, which combined the summarizing of a given reading with directing and acting out scenes with other students in the Circle.



In lieu of the Vocabulary Enricher, students developed several roles to take its place. One role, called Alphabetical Order, selected vocabulary words to share, defined them, and put them in alphabetical order, or asked Circle mates to put the words in alphabetical order. Another role, which they called Sentence Enricher, involved the identification of interesting or confusing sentences to bring to the table to discuss. A third new role was Definition Guess the Word, in which vocabulary words were selected and defined, but when sharing the words in the Circle, students would only tell the definition, and students had to guess the term.

While almost all students decided to keep Discussion Director and Literary Luminary in their repertoires, they did create other fascinating jobs to add to their palettes from which they could choose. Although these roles did not necessarily involve the use of questioning, I observed that these jobs nonetheless did elicit a lot of broad discussion based on inference and speculation. One role, named Character Tracker, was to identify main characters and basically keep track of what they did and what they encountered in an assigned reading. Another original role developed by my students was the Predictor. Once the Predictor had read the assigned reading, he or she was to write at least one paragraph on what he or she thought might happen next in the book.

### Conclusions

For numerous reasons, I was extremely proud of my students. Their initiative and obvious enthusiasm for creating new roles to extend their experiences in Literature Circles was admirable. Furthermore, it demonstrated their clear grasp on the very nature of Literature Circles, in that the Circles are a means of making choices, raising questions, doing the talking, and creating the meaning (Daniels, 1994). In an independent, cooperative fashion, my students were meaningfully engaged in authentic literature discussion experiences, just as I hoped they would be. Their experiences seemed to indicate that they realized the vast

importance of the social situations and the compelling nature of conversations surrounding books, in making our reading more aesthetic and personally evocative. Just as I can recount the images of loving to read and interacting with Grandma on the fluffy, pink blanket, or composing stories with my nursery school teacher, I sincerely hope that my students will remember with fondness their experiences with Literature Circles in 4<sup>th</sup> grade. In fact, my dream for my students is that the power of conversation surrounding books that they experienced, will inspire a lifelong love of reading, writing, questioning, and learning, as it did for me.

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