# Wrestling With My Book Club Paradigm

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A few years ago at an NCTE Conference, Lucy Calkins delivered a talk on students' response to literature, suggesting that we need to engage students in experiences that parallel adult reading experiences. She said, "When I'm curled up in bed and I finish a good book, I don't lean over to my husband and say, 'Please pass me the shoe box, scissors, and tape so I can do a diorama.'"

As a college teacher, I love Calkins' idea that we should try to give students a literary venue that simulates in ways similar to that of adult readers. Book clubs may be the medium. In every class in which I can moderately justify book clubs--writing, young adult literature, and, of course, literature--my students read and respond to at least one book in small groups. My definition of book clubs follows Daniels' definition of literature circles:

> Small, peer-led discussion groups whose members have chosen to read the same story, poem, article, or book. While reading each group-assigned portion of the text (either in or outside of class), members make notes to help them contribute to the upcoming discussion, and everyone comes to the group with ideas to share (2).

As Daniels suggests, I give students choices; they pick a book or negotiate a book choice with friends. This part always works well. It's the response part, the *talking about the books like adults*, that I wrestle with. In any discussion of literature (including non-fiction) I want two things to occur: first, for students to engage personally with the text, to connect it to their lives, and to feel motivated to continue reading the author or genre; second, through the process of reading, writing, and/or discussing a text, for students to think profoundly--beyond the surface or literal level of a text so that they better understand themselves and others. Regardless of how lively a given whole class discussion may become, I always feel part of the affective domain of reading suffers. On the other hand, during the best of book club discussions, I always feel part of the cognitive domain of learning loses. Therefore, the purpose of this text is to begin drawing some conclusions from my wrestling with book clubs to determine whether or not they should be a part of the classroom, especially at the college level.

Unlike most articles, this one is refining a paradigm rather than defining one. For a process to refine my book club paradigm, I refer to a case study of nine student teachers in which Newell, Gringrich, and Johnson identified three patterns of teaching English: procedural display, routine, and reflective practice. In the *procedural display* pattern, student teachers use the "surface features" of a theory, but they really don't/can't "implement such a theory in practice" (Newell, Gringrich, and Johnson 308-9). In the *routine* pattern, student teachers teach the same way that they were taught, or they teach the same way their cooperating teacher does; in both *routines*, theory and success are often ignored. In the *reflective practice* pattern, student teachers use theory to make and to modify their "instructional decisions"; it is a constant synthesis of theory and practice (Newell, Gringrich, and Johnson 302). Newell, Gringrich, and Johnson conclude that the third pattern, *reflective practice*, is the most successful.

My hypothesis is that, as veteran teachers, our instructional practices regarding students' response to literature also fall into these three categories. So if we want a book club to

work, we have to base its design on some of the related theory about reading and responding to literature. Then, we must engage in *reflective practice* by cultivating the parts of theory that work and weeding out the parts that don't work.

Far too much theory and research has been published on reading and book clubs to discuss or even to outline all of them in a single text. I use the following when designing my book clubs for college students.

Literature circles change students' attitudes toward reading. Unfortunately, unmotivated readers see reading as "something done solely for learning purposes" and unrelated to their lives (Williams 589). On the other hand, letting students choose what they read engages them in reading and motivates them to read (Atwell 31). Plus, "Tutors in the Literacy Project consistently reported that children wanted to take home books discussed by others in the group" (Leslie & Allen 421). The next step, peer conversations about books, correlates to a positive attitude toward reading as well as reading improvement and empowers students by giving them choice and a venue for expression (Manning & Manning 380; Van Horn 753). And, if nothing else, students need social reading experiences with peers and teachers just to enjoy reading and see it as something beyond the classroom (Ivey 375).

Also, book clubs lend themselves to reader response theory since they focus on the reader making meaning from reading a text, rather than the reader making meaning through connecting the text with the author's life. Furthermore, multiple valid meanings can be present in the same text, rather than one valid interpretation exclusively inside the text (Beach 156). According to Rosenblatt, "The creation of a setting for personal response is basic.... The youth needs to be given the opportunity and the courage to approach literature personally, to let it mean something to him directly" (78, 66). This approach to understanding literature encourages different interpretations by students within a book club.

Along with these affective domain objectives, book clubs also can meet cognitive domain objectives. For example, the standards for English language arts, created collaboratively by IRA and NCTE, endorse opportunities for students to choose,

read, and discuss literature together (25). The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results state that there is a positive correlation between students (grades 8 and 12) who are asked to explain their understanding and/or interpretation of a text weekly or more often and student reading performance (United States 15). Additionally, "students who reported reading eleven or more pages each day for school and for homework had higher average reading scores than students who reported reading 10 or fewer pages each day" (United States 88). Finally, small groups operate best when students are accountable for their work (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec 26). The combination of these studies implies that book clubs can enhance students' reading and writing skills, especially if they are required to do some writing about their reading. In addition, some sort of student preparation prior to the book club should increase student learning.

## Reflective Practice and Book Clubs

As veteran teachers, one of the first things we do after planning a lesson or an activity like book clubs is to think about all the things that can go wrong with it. At the college level, I see three potential problems. First, students nod and smile in their groups, but don't read the book, or they only read part of the book, and so there needs to be some sort of an accountability measure. Second, if the accountability instrument is too extensive, book clubs become another academic assignment, unrelated to students' lives. Finally, students may only do a surface level discussion of the book and miss some of the subtle nuances of a text or miss some connections between themes, ideas, and so forth.

Thus far, I have tried two book club models, briefly described below. In each model, I tried to create a design which would circumvent the *potential problems*. Philosophically, I prefer the open-ended model; experience and theory, however, have convinced me that the role-assigned model is the better of the two. That much of the paradigm has been solidified. Even though I have used the same approach in very different classes with very different genres,

the success and the student feedback are similar in each class.

The first book club design was completely open-ended. After a book talk on possible book choices, students were divided into groups of three to five students. Most groups were formed because students wanted to read the same book; some were formed because friends wanted to be together, and then they picked a book. I gave students specific days to discuss the book in class and a book completion date, but they determined the number of pages for the days in class when they discussed the book. As facilitator, I wandered around the room, joining each group for a few minutes as students talked about books. Students were not given any other guidance or rules for their discussion. At the end of the discussion time, each group gave the class an informal, one or two minute oral summary of their discussion. In writing classes, the final accountability measure was a collaboratively written book review; in literature classes, sometimes the final accountability measure was a book review, or a short literary analysis paper.

Similar to the open-ended model, students picked their groups, books, and reading deadlines after a book talk for the assigned roles model. Borrowing from the process used in many elementary classrooms (Goatley; McMahon; Pardo), each student took a specific role during the book club discussion, such as leader, historian, wordsmith and so forth. (Role titles and descriptions were modified to better fit college students (see appendix). Group members decided who took which role for each discussion, and they used a grid to keep track of their responsibilities. On discussion days, students prepared their duties prior to class and played their role during book club discussion. At the start of each book club discussion, I suggested that the groups use the data they prepared only as a springboard for discussion, not a guideline for discussion.

## Findings

As mentioned earlier, reflective practice includes two parts of curriculum design: first, basing instructional practices on theory or empirical data; second, weighing its suc-

cess in the classroom and making it fit a particular group of students. The findings listed below are standard reactions from my students when I ask them about book club discussions. My analysis appears after the list of student responses.

1. I feel accountable when I have to talk about a book in a group of 2-3 people. If I haven't read it, it's obvious to them, and I feel like a jerk.

2. Sometimes with the assigned role stuff, we start with it, then put it aside and just talk.

3. We really didn't use the stuff we prepared; we just talked about the books.

4. [After doing book clubs] I enjoy reading books more now, because it is for fun, not just for class.

5. [To another group] Is _____ worth reading?

6. I can fill out the assigned role stuff without reading the whole text.

7. The assigned roles are like any other assignment. We get in our group, and each person takes a turn and reads what he/she prepared.

8. Can we read another one?

My perception is that when students get into small groups and chat with no direction, the results are mixed. Some groups get into a deep discussion and ask me questions for clarification. Some talk, but only about the surface of a text. Some never get to the book. One group of women confessed to me after a book club discussion that they never got to the book because they were talking about *boobs*. As a result, for the past few years, I've followed the "assigned roles model' instead of the open-ended model. Despite this, book clubs remain on my syllabi

semester after semester because when given a choice for a book, students sit up straight and appear to get excited about the book they pick to read. In addition, some students read an extra book because another book club liked it, and it sounded good. Like most cooperative or collaborative learning activities, it increases the amount of student participation. But I struggle with the lack of depth during a book club discussion. They may dip beneath the surface-level of meaning, but rarely, if ever, does any group achieve the depth that we reach during a whole-class discussion.

## Discussion

After rereading and revising this text numerous times, it became clear that I am wrestling as much or more with *my* goals for book clubs as with synthesizing theory and practice. That's why the "response part" not only didn't work, but couldn't work. As stated earlier, my goal for any literary discussion is for students to respond to literature like adults. Then, as they talk about their reading, they will glean new, profound insights about themselves and others; these experiences will convince them to read stimulating literature frequently. That, I realized, was my mistake. That's not always how adults informally respond to literature.

For example, my best friend, Joyce, is a poet and a voracious reader. Occasionally, we read the same book, and we'll casually talk about it. We talk about the parts we liked, hated, and laughed at. We compare a book to other similar books and discuss its strengths and weaknesses; occasionally, we may discuss themes, archetypes and symbols and other nuances, but usually we don't. It's mostly "the good parts." Besides that, talk about books seems to come up casually in conversations, and occasionally with depth. Years ago, before book clubs were in vogue and I had more time and no children, I belonged to faculty book clubs, and they ran pretty much the same way as my casual conversations with Joyce. When Joyce and I—adults—respond verbally to literature, we don't always reveal new, profound insights that might have come to us as we read. But we are sharing with each other how passionately we care about books,

and giving each other suggestions for further reading, and sharing insights, all of which our students do. I also think we respond deeply on a personal level to books, but don't or can't always verbalize this in a casual conversation. Nonetheless, our discussions, however casual, underscore our love of books and our determination to keep reading stimulating literature.

Students do emulate adult book clubs and adult response to literature, which means their talk vacillates between the text, their experiences, their fears, and even their "boobs." It can and usually does have less of an academic nuance than a typical literature discussion because book clubs better imitate an adult discussion of literature. Furthermore, students have more opportunity to engage and discuss in a small group than they do in a whole class discussion. Most importantly, I believe they respond to literature on a more personal level.

## Conclusion

Lucy Calkins scoffed at the idea and value of dioramas because they are an inauthentic response to and assessment of literature, and I agree with her. But in the fourth grade, my daughter loved to make dioramas, and they enhanced her interaction with literature. My son hated dioramas, but he would interrupt me any time, day or night, to read to me "the good parts" of his current book. As a classroom teacher, I am searching for ways to get my students to enjoy responding to literature, become lifetime readers, glean insight about themselves and others via literature, and enjoy reading. And if a diorama worked, I'd use it. But first I must determine what I want the diorama to accomplish and whether or not it can.

Writing this text has forced me to realize that when analyzing the *talking about books* part of book clubs,

> The teacher . . . . must be ready to face the fact that the student's reactions will inevitably be in terms of his own temperament and background. Undoubtedly,

> these may often lead him to do injustice to the text. Nevertheless, the student's primary experience of the work will have had meaning for him in these personal terms and no others (Rosenblatt 51).

Each student does not engage in an in-depth discussion of literature with her/his peers during each meeting. But some do. Some who read the text wouldn't otherwise. Some volunteer information related to their lives and their reading that could not be shared in a whole group. Some push aside their "role assignments" and "talk" about the book. And some never do.

Writing this article has enabled me to analyze my purpose for a specific instructional practice and its validity: book clubs. Initially, I thought the *response part* of book clubs was ineffective; the real problem was that my expectations were unrealistic. I wanted book clubs to be the panacea for teaching literature, and they are not and probably never can be. Therefore, as teachers we need to continue scaffolding reading experiences for our students, including leading whole class discussion, asking provocative questions, and explaining literary nuances. On the other hand, book clubs do meet several key purposes in the teaching of literature. First, they simulate an authentic, adult-like setting for discussing literature, which even the finest teacher-centered, whole class discussions typically deny. Second, book clubs can provide the setting for an authentic, personal response to literature where multiple responses are not only accepted, but welcomed. Third, it's a setting in which the ethos becomes "get to read" rather than "have to read." In conclusion, we each need to continue wrestling with the purpose, the design, the success, and the amount of all literary experiences implemented into our classrooms--including book clubs.

## Appendix: Book Club Meetings

Each member of your book club has an assigned role; each time you meet, have a different role. Come to class pre-

pared for your role; I will check your notes during book club. All notes must be typed. If this is a problem, see me today

If you want to earn bonus points for this class, you may do a separate book club outside of class. See me to set up due dates and additional book options. You may earn a maximum of 10 bonus points.

I. Historian/Predictor

1. Often in groups, certain people supply everyone else with background information or they contextualize the situation. That is your role.

2. Explain to the group five facts related to the subject at hand which you gleaned by doing a bit of research.

3.Often in groups, someone predicts what will happen if the group makes *X* choice or *Y* choice. Your role is to predict what will happen in the novel or what will happen to the characters after the end of the novel.

II. Analyst

1. As you read, pick out what you think are important events, symbols, patterns, and so forth.

2. List at least 5 items you think are important.

3. In a sentence or phrase, state the reason you think it is important.

III. Chairperson

1. Start and end book club meeting.

2. Watch the time and keep the group on task.

3.Summarize the text at the beginning of the meeting (written). Read to group and ask for alterations.

4. At the end of the meeting, list the key points discussed (written). Turn them in to the teacher.

IV. Critic

1. Your job is to make the members of this group (or any other) to think. You do this by asking intelligent questions.

2. Write 2-3 fact questions for the group, which you gen-

uinely want clarified, because you are unsure of the answer.

3. Write 2-3 open-ended questions, which you will ask the group during the meeting. My personal philosophy: the true sign of intelligence is the ability to ask good questions.

V. Applyer (required)

1. Often in groups, one person applies the theory or idea at hand.

2. List at least 10 things this novel suggests about adolescents and / or about education and adolescents.

VI. Wordsmith (We will not do this, but you use this one with students)

1. Find 5 words in the reading which you may or may not have heard before, but did not know the definition.
2. Write each word on a separate line and leave 2-3 lines between words.
3. Guess: In a sentence or so, write what you think the word means.
4. Dictionary: Find the definition in the dictionary; in a sentence, paraphrase the meaning of the word.

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