

LEARNING LANGUAGE THROUGH DIALOGUE ABOUT LITERATURE



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As a beginning classroom teacher, I believed my role was to teach my students *about* language. I drilled them on the skills that I thought they needed to become readers and they spent their time memorizing sounds, phonics rules, grammar, and vocabulary words. If they got all of their worksheets filled out and there was time left over, they could read a book.

I gradually realized that my students avoided reading unless it was assigned to them. Books and reading were "schoolwork," not "lifework." While they could "read" in the sense that they could say the words on the page, they did not see reading as having a purpose in their lives nor did they think critically about what they read. Reading was a constant struggle for them and they groaned when we opened a book in class.

Michael Halliday (1985), an Australian linguist, found in his studies of oral language that young children easily learn language if they are involved in meaningful language events in which they have the opportunity to learn language, learn about language and learn through language. In other words, they learn to talk by having many opportunities to "do" language by talking and listening to others, by exploring how language functions, and by using language to get something done within events that have a purpose for them (beyond pleasing the teacher).

Halliday's work provided a framework for me to rethink my reading instruction (Short, 1997). I realized that I had made learning to read difficult by only focusing on learning about language. I added opportunities for students to learn language which meant that they had time to actually read stories and informational materials that interested them, without being interrupted by my instruction. They needed time to read and read and read many kinds of materials without having to write a book report or answer a set of questions.

I also needed to create opportunities for them to learn through language so they could use reading to learn about the world and themselves. We read books that had many personal connections and social issues and used dialogue to think critically about our understandings of these books. We wrote, drew, and talked about our responses to these books.

We continued to learn about language as well through instruction focused on developing reading strategies and knowledge of language and literary structures. However, now students were more interested in learning about language because they were actually reading and using reading to think about their lives. Reading mattered to them; it was no longer just "schoolwork" forced onto them by me as their teacher.

One particular engagement that

encouraged students to learn through language was literature circles. Literature circles are open-ended discussions where students use dialogue to think critically about the meaning of what they are reading. They examine various interpretations and personal connections to a piece of literature through thinking with each other (Short & Pierce, 1998).

The assumption is often made that literature circles are for proficient readers and that second language learners need to learn skills and grammar first before they can talk critically about meaning. However, as Halliday points out, effective language learning occurs *only* when students learn through language as well as learn about language and learn language. Learning language is more difficult and less meaningful for our students when we do not engage them in thoughtful dialogue around literature that raises issues significant in their lives.

This article focuses on ways of engaging our students in thoughtful talk about literature. This focus does not exclude the importance of also giving students time to read broadly from materials that interest them and teaching them about language. All of these are significant in the lives of our students as readers, but my focus here will be on learning through language.

Engagements that highlight

learning through language provide the *reason* for reading. We read because we want to learn about life, not just to practice reading. Our emphasis is on *what* we are learning and exploring, not on our reading process. While extensive engagements support readers in gaining reading strategies and becoming proficient readers, intensive engagements support readers in becoming literate thinkers who deeply and critically consider what they read.

Reading is a transactional process. Louise Rosenblatt (1978) argues that readers actively construct understandings by bringing meaning *to* as well as taking meaning *from* a text. As readers, students do not focus on extracting information from text or figuring out what the teacher believes is the correct interpretation. Students enter into the story world of fiction and nonfiction to learn about life and make sense of their world. They bring their tentative understandings of these books to literature circles where they share their experiences with each other. As they share, they critique and examine their interpretations and connections.

Everyone has a chance to give their opinion and even if you don't agree with that person, you keep on talking because you know that you will get more ideas. You aren't trying to figure out one right answer. In reading groups, when someone gave the right answer, we were done talking. In literature circles, we keep on going. We try to come up with as many different directions as possible. Chris, Age 9.

As part of a class focus on human rights, a group in Gloria Kauffman's fifth grade classroom participated in a literature circle of the picture book *Baseball Saved Us* by Ken Mochizuki. They identified with this story of a young Japanese American boy in a World War II internment camp who deals with prejudice by playing baseball. Ruben, Ramon, Tino, Rudy, and John talked about their own experiences playing baseball and nervously trying to please their

fathers. They also discussed issues of racism in their own school and connected the story to Jane Yolen's *The Devil's Arithmetic* and concentration camps. In addition, they made connections to slavery, an issue they had dealt with in an earlier study. Through these connections, they were able to examine issues of racism and self-identity within the book and in their own lives.

Literature circles offer readers the opportunity to become literate. Through dialogue in these circles, readers are encouraged to become critical thinkers. While dialogue lies at the heart of all literature circles, there is no one "right" way to organize and integrate the circles into the curriculum. Teachers and students will make many different decisions and these decisions will influence the kind of talk occurring with the group.

Organizing the Literature Circles

The number of students in a literature circle creates different group dynamics and opportunities for talk. Some teachers invite the whole class to read the same book, short story, poem or article. They alternate between small group and whole class discussions. For example, the class might begin with a whole group discussion to brainstorm important issues, break into small groups to discuss these issues, and then report on their discussions to the class. This type of group membership opens many different perspectives, and students quickly learn how to discuss a book. Whole class groups, however, often mean that fewer voices are heard, and students have no choice in the literature that is read and discussed.

Literature circles often occur in small groups of 4-5 students. The small groups give students a choice in the literature read and more opportunities to talk and think with each other in a supportive context. As the small groups share, students often become interested in reading the literature of the other groups.

A third option is to read and discuss with a partner. The interactions are more intense because there are only two people and so both must actively participate. The drawback, of course, is that the readers share just two perspectives. For students who have not experienced small groups, discussing with a partner is a comfortable way to begin. Both partners learn how to interact with another person and both must take an active role in talking and listening.

One of my favorite engagements for introducing literature circles is *Say Something* (Short & Harste, 1996). Students work with a partner to read a short story or picture book. One student reads aloud a section of the story (several paragraphs) to the other and stops. At that point, both students "say something" about the story -- a connection, question, prediction, or comment. The second student then reads aloud the next section of the story and again stops so that both can say something. After reading the story, the students gather as a class to talk about it. This engagement encourages students to be active readers who think about the story as they read. It also gives students a chance to become comfortable with the process of talking and thinking about a book.

Another good partner strategy is *Written Conversation* (Short & Harste, 1996) where two students share one piece of paper and one pencil. They converse about a book through writing rather than talking. This strategy encourages students to listen to each other before responding, something they often find difficult to do in oral conversations. Typically no talking is allowed, except with younger children who often need to read their writing to each other.

Materials for Literature Circle

When I first began exploring literature circles, I used Shared Book Sets where I supplied students with multiple copies of several titles.

Students signed up for the book and group of their choice. In this way, students in a particular group read the same piece of literature and discussed their different interpretations of that book. Because of the shared experience of reading the same book, the group was able to discuss and explore in depth their responses to the book and their differing understandings of literary elements such as theme and character. For example, during an inquiry on the Holocaust, Leslie Kahn had multiple copies of titles such as *Snow Treasure* by Marie McSwigan, *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry, and *Escape from Warsaw* by I. Serrailier available for her sixth graders.

Collecting sets of multiple copies of literature takes time, and so I began to use Text Sets for some of the discussions. Text Sets are sets of conceptually related books with a single copy of each title (Short, 1992). In each group, students read different books, share their books with each other, and search for connections across these books. The books in a set are closely related in some way:

- theme (dealing with fear, living at peace with others)
- topic (the moon, grandparents)
- author (Eric Carle, Katherine Paterson)
- illustrator (Ed Young, Tomie de Paola)
- genre (mysteries, tall tales)
- culture (Japan, Navajo)
- Usually the sets contain literature from a variety of genres and provide readers with different perspectives on the same theme or topic. Sandy Kaser put together text sets of picture books and poetry on fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters, grandparents, and family stories as part of her focus on family. Each group of students chose one set of these books to discuss. The grandparent set had books such as *Knots on a Counting Rope* by Bill Martin Jr. & John Archambault,

Grandma's Joy by Eloise Greenfield, *The Always Prayer Shawl* by Sheldon Oberman, *A Birthday Basket for Tia* by Pat Mora, and *Poems for Grandmothers* collected by Myra Cohn Livingston. This set of culturally diverse books focused on the stories and traditions passed between grandparents and grandchildren.

When I began using Text Sets with children, I quickly realized that students had a different type of discussion with these sets. While Shared Book discussions involve an intensive look at one book, Text Set discussions include more retellings and a focus on broad connections and comparisons across literature. Readers see literature as part of a larger connected whole and become aware of diverse perspectives on similar topics as they search for connections across a variety of texts.

Realizing that Text Set discussions might overwhelm readers at first, I also used Paired Books. Two books are paired together because they offer contrasting or alternative perspectives. Paired books give students a chance to have an in depth experience with two books while still focusing on connections across literature.

As part of a focus on modern culture, I paired *Snow White in New York* by Fionna French with *Snow White* by Paul Heins, *Ruby* by Michael Emberely with *Little Red Riding Hood* by Trina Schart Hyman and *Tucker Pfeffercorn* by Barry Moser with *Rumpelstiltskin* by Paul Galdone. Each of these paired books involve a traditional folktale set long ago and a modern variant of that tale set in today's society. Two students read and discussed one of the books. Then they met with the two students who had read and discussed the other book in their set. All four talked together, comparing the similarities and differences between the two books.

Choosing the reading materials for literature circles can seem overwhelming at first. I used to worry about making wrong choices. However, I found that as long as the

material is meaty, well-written, and lends itself to conversation and analysis, my choices are almost unlimited -- fiction and nonfiction, picture books, short stories, chapter length books, poetry, folklore, and magazine and newspaper articles. In addition, I looked through textbooks for quality literature and excerpts. My overarching goal, however, is to choose literature that creates powerful story worlds with issues and connections that inspire students to talk, analyze, and wonder.

Initiating the Literature Circles

If students will be meeting in small groups, the selections can be introduced through book talks. Students will need time to browse the literature before choosing what group they want to join. Some teachers post a sign-up sheet that lists the Shared Book Sets or Text Sets with 5 slots for names under each title. Students sign up on a "first come, first served" basis. Other teachers have students complete a ballot with their first, second, and third choices and the teacher makes the final group selections. Choice is critical because it fosters ownership and helps guarantee that students will enjoy and learn from the literature circle.

Once the groups are formed, students read the books. In some classrooms, students read chapter length books. They can meet in their groups and discuss as they read or read the entire book and then meet to discuss. When they discuss as they read, they are able to clarify confusing aspects of the story and support each other's enjoyment of the story and this can be particularly helpful to students reading in their second language. In other classrooms, students read the entire book before discussing it in literature circles. Their literature circles occur after they have had their own individual "lived through" experiences with that book and so they bring broader perspectives to their discussion.

Text Set groups usually move continuously between reading and discussing. Most groups begin with students browsing through the books in a set and each choosing one or two books to read alone or with a partner. The group then meets to share their books and to explore initial connections. In most cases, the students spend time reading other books in the set before coming back for further discussion and comparison. They often become so interested in the other books in the set that they end up reading all or most of those books.

Inevitably some students will choose books for literature circles that they cannot yet read by themselves. Since the groups contain students who are reading at different proficiencies, one strategy is to pair the student with a partner from the group. Another possibility is to have them read along with a tape of the book or for the teacher to read the story aloud to the group. It is important to remember that the dialogue that characterizes literature circles is the most important part of the meaning-making process. I am not overly concerned if students cannot read their discussion books by themselves. I know that as they participate in meaningful literature discussions, they learn what reading is all about and they are helped in numerous ways to become independent readers.

Encouraging Conversation

Literature circles begin with friends talking about their reading. Students share their favorite parts, retell sections, discuss parts they found confusing, make connections to their own lives or other literature, and engage in social chatter. These first discussions are a time to freely explore a wide range of tentative ideas without focusing on one idea. Readers need a chance to explore the literature they read and share their "lived through" experiences before they analyze and critique those experiences. They do not write a summary, answer specific questions, or fill out a story structure

worksheet. They simply share their enjoyment and experience with the book. Jamie, a nine-year-old explains, "Literature circles take the ideas out of your head rather than keeping all the ideas in your head. In literature circles, you get to know a person better and how that book relates to their life and how you and them relate."

When I participated in a literature circle of first graders discussing *Rosie's Walk* by Pat Hutchins, they began by sharing favorite pages and laughing over the various predicaments the fox gets himself into. They talked about what might have happened to the fox at the end of the story and examined the last picture for clues. They debated what kind of homes foxes live in and whether the bees could follow him. They talked about other books with foxes. They looked at the illustrations and the designs on the animals and talked about why Rosie was different sizes on different pages. Their discussion skipped around as they excitedly shared their thinking with each other.

Initially, in classrooms where students have not experienced literature discussions, they may remain silent or make limited comments like "I liked the story" or "It was boring." Their school experiences have not encouraged them to be active readers who enter into a story experience and discuss their understandings with other readers. They need time, patience, and encouragement together with continuous demonstrations from the teacher and classmates on ways to think actively and critically about their reading.

Students may be reluctant to share their thoughts because they don't believe that teachers really want to know what they think. Many students think that teachers don't care about their personal thoughts and ideas. They suspect that teachers care only about the right answer. To convince her students otherwise, Carol Hill, a second grade teacher, asked children to choose a book from a stack of picture books that had already been read aloud to the class. She placed

an easel next to her chair and, as she read this book aloud for a second time, she stopped periodically to ask children, "What's on your mind?" She jotted their comments on the chart. At the end of the book, children chose several comments to discuss in greater depth. This engagement signals that books can be read more than once and helps students realize that their teachers do value their opinions.

Another way to encourage students to share what's on their minds is to place a large piece of brainstorming paper on the table. As students read, they are encouraged to jot or sketch words, images, and connections about their reading on the graffiti board. They each take their own corner of the paper — their jottings are not organized in any way. Through this process, they capture random thoughts and images as they read.

Save the Last Word for Me (Short & Harste, 1996) is another strategy that encourages students to share their thoughts and ideas. Using a slip of paper or an index card, students write down quotes they find interesting or significant from the book they are reading. On the other side of the paper, they write down why they chose that particular quote. Students bring these quotes to the group and each chooses one to share. After a student reads a quote, the rest of the group talks about why they think that quote is significant. The student who shared the quote must remain silent but gets the "last word" about why he or she chose that quote. Younger children can show an illustration from the book instead of reading a quote.

From Conversation to Dialogue

Once readers have had a chance to share their initial responses in literature circles, the group develops a more specific focus for the discussion and moves back and forth between sharing personal responses and critical dialogue. This focus grows out of

their questions, connections, and responses and gives them the chance to begin analyzing their reading and their responses. Successful dialogue not only requires readers to share their thinking, but also to listen and consider the ideas of other readers. They move from sharing a wide range of connections in conversations to intensively considering several focused issues through dialogue to extend and critique their response.

After their initial, excited discussion of *Rosie's Walk*, the first graders debated whether Rosie knew the fox was behind her. They examined her expression in the illustrations, talked about reasons why she wouldn't want the fox to know that she knew he was there, and considered whether or not hens can hear. As they discussed Rosie's ability to hear, they talked about their own experiences with earaches and consulted a child from a farm to find out whether hens have ears. While they didn't reach a final conclusion, they considered a wide range of possibilities, drawing from their own experiences and the book's illustrations.

A key feature of literature circles is that students choose the issues to discuss; teachers don't impose them. Teachers can certainly have a say, and some teachers prepare by reading the book and making notes on possibilities for discussion. But the focus of the actual discussion grows from the group of readers, not from a study guide. Teachers are participants who share their thoughts, connections, and responses to books rather than questioners who determine the direction of the group. Teachers are not always present in every group and so students are encouraged to develop their own strategies for sustaining discussion and pursuing issues significant to them.

I find it helpful to have the groups decide at the end of each day what their discussion focus will be for the following day. That means that students are responsible for preparing for the discussion -- what do they think about the chosen

focus and what are they going to say? This preparation might involve rereading sections of the book, writing in their literature logs, or even further research. One way to help students find a focus for their discussion is to brainstorm a web or list of everything they could discuss from their book or text set and then to choose an issue or question from that list for the next day.

In Pam Sherman's first grade, students had been exploring different versions of "The Three Bears" for several weeks through read-aloud engagements and drama before moving into literature circles. I met with five children in a literature circle on the Paul Galdone version of "The Three Bears." The children began by sharing their favorite pages of the story and explaining why they liked them. After 25 minutes, the conversations slowed down. I pulled out a large sheet of paper and asked the children to tell me the important ideas about this book that had come up in their sharing. As we talked, I webbed our brainstorming on the paper. We then looked at the web and I asked the children which of these ideas they would like to discuss the next day. The children chose to discuss whether the little bear was mad or sad because "if he was sad, Goldilocks should have stayed and been his friend."

Writing or drawing responses in literature logs gives students a chance to reflect on their individual experiences with books. They are encouraged to write personal connections and opinions about the literature, rather than retellings. In some classrooms, students make brief notes about their thinking on post-its and use these to mark parts they want to share.

Sometimes particular discussion strategies such as Sketch to Stretch (Short & Harste, 1996) can support students as they move to dialogue in their discussions. In Sketch to Stretch each student is invited to create a quick sketch of the meaning of the story. Students do not draw illustrations of the story, but sketches of their personal

connections and meanings. Students show their sketches in their literature circles and the other group members talk about the kinds of meanings they see in a particular sketch. The student who drew the sketch then explains his or her graphic depiction.

Sharing and Presenting to Others

Once a group has finished discussing their book, they decide whether they want to share their piece of literature informally with the class or take time to put together a formal presentation such as a skit or mural. Initially, when I worked with students on these presentations, I was discouraged by the "cute" projects they created which were often only peripherally related to their discussion. I found that if I ask students "What do you want to do?" when they are ready to work on a presentation, they immediately name whatever is popular in the classroom. Everyone chooses to act out a skit because that's what's "in" at the moment. Instead I ask them, "What do you want other students to understand about your literature and discussion? What do you think was most important?" We create a web that summarizes their discussion. We then talk about how they can share these ideas with others and brainstorm a list of many possibilities and carefully consider which ones might communicate the ideas they want to share.

The purpose of this sharing or presentation is to encourage students to pull their thinking and understandings about a book together. As they focus on how to share their ideas with other class members, they develop even deeper understandings of the book for themselves. The sharing also encourages other class members to read these books.

CONCLUSION

As students engage in dialogue and inquiry through literature, they come to understand and appreciate the ways in which they are connected to others in their community and to the broader worlds of literature and life. The diversity of opinion in these discussions creates new possibilities for growth, fosters critical reflection, and transforms learning. Karen, a nine-year-old, conveys the power of literature

circles in these words, "Literature circles changed me in my eyesight, and in my brain too.

Literature circles provide opportunities for students to become active, critical readers who are able to thoughtfully consider what they read. They actively construct understandings as they read to learn about life and to make sense of their experiences and feelings. And in

the process, they become more comfortable with using their second language as a way to think and talk, not just to complete skills exercises in their classroom.

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