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Issues and Trends: Teacher Book Clubs: Establishing Literature Discussion Groups for Teachers

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Source: *The Reading Teacher*, Apr., 1994, Vol. 47, No. 7, Literacy in the Content Areas: New Definitions and Decisions for the 21st Century (Apr., 1994), pp. 574-576

Published by: International Literacy Association and Wiley

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/20201319>

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ISSUES AND TRENDS

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Teacher book clubs: Establishing literature discussion groups for teachers

Are you looking for something new to do for professional development at your school? Something that your colleagues will enjoy and take an active role in? Establishing a book club may be just what you're looking for.

In the past few years, book clubs have grown in popularity, both in the general public and in education circles. The March 11, 1990, *Chicago Sun-Times* reported, "These days, it's positively *de rigueur* among baby-boom intelligencia to carve out a few hours once a month to pick apart a piece of literature and a buffet table"; and the March 13, 1992, edition of *The New York Times* reported on the efforts of one magazine to develop reading discussion groups among its readers by providing cards that inquired about readers' interest in forming book clubs. "More than 8,200 readers filled out the card that was included. The magazine matched them up by ZIP code and established 500 salons (reading discussion groups)" (Rabinovitz, 1992).

Why is there so much interest in book clubs?

Book clubs are so popular because they provide an intellectual social forum where people can share ideas, thoughts, feelings, and reactions to a piece of literature. The talk that takes place during book club meetings is often based on a personal response to literature in which participants read selections and share insights based on their own experiences with the text.

Probst (1991) and others have argued for the reader-response approach to literature based on Rosenblatt's (1991) work, suggesting that competent, satisfied readers often define themselves against the background of the text and the text against the background they themselves provide. He and other educators (e.g., Purves, in press), however, have argued that this analysis must be done in a social context in which readers learn to pay attention to the critical influence of other people's responses about the meaning and significance they derive from a particular literary work. The interactions between the reader and the text and among the reader and other readers make book clubs an ideal tool for increasing awareness and understanding among book club participants.

How do book clubs function as a professional development tool?

During the past 2 years, we have been involved in a book club with elementary school teachers in a local San Diego school in which the students come from many different cultural backgrounds. The purpose for our book club was to focus on the theme of multiculturalism in American society by reading contemporary fiction. We found that teachers and other staff members who participated in book clubs which focused on issues of multiculturalism often developed an awareness of other cultures by identifying

similarities in their own lives with the lives of characters in stories. Participants often began to examine connections between their personal experiences and the text and to explore the function that they played, as readers, in the development of those connections (Flood, Lapp, & Ranck-Buhr, 1993). In addition to a growing understanding about issues related to multiculturalism, we realized that we also expanded our understanding about our own literacy processing as well as our understanding of teaching and learning.

Let's take a look at a group of teachers participating in a book club discussion about "Mexicans," a short story about a child's feelings toward the habits and rituals of her traditional grandmother, from the book *Woman Hollering Creek* by Sandra Cisneros (1991). One participant, Gil, a Euro-American male, remarked:

I read it and I had some feelings. I read it again. I didn't write anything right away. I read it again. Then I wrote. I just wanted it to kinda work. I don't know if it was the mood I was in or what, I had this incredible opening of my childhood psyche by reading this. People would say this is Hispanic. You're not Hispanic. But I think it transcended all that ...

Another participant, Jack, also a Euro-American male, noted, "I was most struck that you read it, you thought about it, you read it again, and you thought about it again."

In this example, Gil stated his belief that literature can be a vehicle for

developing personal understanding and expanding views of other cultures—seeing similarities between different cultural groups. In addition, he also began to think about and analyze his own literacy processing, which allowed him to make connections between his life as a teacher and his life as a reader.

Other participants in the group saw the “realities” of their own cultures in the works and made connections from the text to their own lives. Alicia, a Hispanic female, remarked, “All that discipline stuff that happens in the story is very typical, certainly in Hispanic families...there is something there that is particular to certain cultures (certainly to my own experience).”

Through their interactions with the text and with one another, the members of the book club began to develop an awareness of similarities among themselves, their colleagues, and their students despite their different cultural backgrounds. As one Euro-American teacher commented, “These stories helped remind me that my students have a life beyond the classroom.”

How can a book club become a reality?

Getting started

First, find out who is interested in participating in a book club. You might consider putting together an informative newsletter or memo to let other teachers know what a book club is and what purposes it can serve in your school.

Once you have a few people willing to participate, you should look at the following:

- the resources that will be needed;
- the amount of time that is available for the book club;
- the kind of space that is available;
- the materials that are available to you.

A portion of your time will also need to be spent on management issues involved in establishing a book club. Some of these include selecting books and making sure they are available in the necessary quantities.

Once you have the books, you will need to decide on a meeting place. It's

best to find a location that has comfortable seating for all of the members of the book club. If your book club will be taking place at your school site, you might select a particular classroom, your library/media center, or the teachers' lounge.

How do you select books?

Selecting books that will be used for book clubs is no different than selecting books for any other recreational reading activity. First, you will want to decide the type of materials you plan to read. Text length is a consideration for very busy professionals. When you start your book club, it might be best to start with short books or short stories that can be finished in brief periods of time. You will have time later to read long novels when participants have enough time for them and after participants can see how beneficial a book club can be. Once the book club is operating, encourage members to suggest new titles.

We have found that collections of short stories work well for several reasons: They provide reading material for several sessions, they are short enough to be read in one sitting, and they cover a wide variety of topics. The following is a list of books that we have used in our book club. The first four selections are collections of short stories and the others are short novels.

Woman Hollering Creek by Sandra Cisneros (1991)

House on Mango Street by Sandra Cisneros (1989)

The Assniation by Joyce Carol Oates (1988)

Spider Woman's Granddaughters edited by Paula Gunn Allen (1989)

The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison (1972)

Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston (1991)

The Joy Luck Club by Amy Tan (1989)

The first meeting

After the organizational issues are out of the way and members have read the first selection, you will be ready

for your first book club meeting. Book club meetings should be held for about an hour or an hour and a half. The number of times your book club meets each month may depend on the length of the reading selection. We try to meet once a month.

As you begin your discussion, you might ask the members, “What did you think about the book?” This question or a similarly broad one will encourage discussion. Once the discussion begins, it should be free flowing. If it isn't, you may want to ask, “What feelings did you have as you were reading the book? Did the story cause you to think about other experiences you've had?” Be sure to keep your questions very broad so that everyone feels free to contribute. Once a discussion begins, it tends to flow very easily, leaving little need for additional questions.

Journal writing

Journal writing is an excellent method for encouraging members to reflect on their readings and on the discussions in which they've participated. Members may write their thoughts, feelings, and reflections about the reading in their journals when reading the selections on their own. You may want to encourage members to bring their journals with them to the book club meetings. Sometimes these writings spur discussions within the group. After the group discussion of the reading, members should be encouraged to write in their journals again. This repeated response procedure encourages members to reflect on changes in their ideas and responses to the literature after they've had the opportunity to discuss the reading with their colleagues and friends. We've found that our ideas are often enhanced after we hear the thoughts of others.

A final note

Literature discussion groups hold promise as effective tools for our personal development as teachers. The exchanges that result from discussions about literature create environments that welcome participation and the sharing of diverse points of view. As

one social studies teacher, who participated in a book club, said about his exchanges with his colleagues: "[Before this]...at my school, when we did talk, we were so angry and worn out that all we did was complain or talk shop. [Then we had a book club and things changed.] I really enjoyed this" (Rabinovitz, 1992).

Note: The work that is reported in this column was supported, in part, by a National Reading Research Center project of the Universities of Georgia and Maryland (PR/Award No. 117A200071), as administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Office of Education. It was also supported, in part, by a grant from the Dean's Office, College of Education, San Diego State University.

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