



# Overcoming Theoretical and Pedagogical Impediments to Quality Literature Discussions

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## ABSTRACT

Literature study discussions have been included in many instructional frameworks for the past twenty years. As classroom teachers struggled to get quality discussions going, researchers and educators offered a variety of pedagogical approaches, theoretical considerations, and instructional resources to support their efforts. While the use of literature study groups may remain an important component of instruction, particular theoretical and pedagogical considerations may, in fact, impede the quality of the discussions. This article focuses on overcoming some of the theoretical and pedagogical impediments necessary to enact and support quality literature discussions.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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With the best of intentions, many ideas concerning literacy instruction seem to work against their desired outcomes (Duffy & Hoffman, 1999). One distinct example of this phenomenon is the effect of particular classroom procedures, instructional approaches, and theoretical orientations to what has been referred to as literature study groups (Peterson & Eeds, 1990) or literature circles (Daniels, 2001). For the purpose of this article, I will refer to discussions between a teacher and a small group of students, focusing on a single picture or chapter book, as a literature study group.

In this article, I will describe two theoretical assertions and two pedagogical approaches that may impede teachers and students from enacting quality literature discussions in their classroom. While these impediments may be unintentionally imposed by classroom teachers, it is important to bring them to light in order to examine their effects on literature study discussions.

In various educational publications, researchers and experienced classroom teachers have offered instructional approaches for supporting students' engagement in quality literature discussions (Dias, 1992; Eeds & Peterson, 1997; Eeds & Wells, 1989; Huck, 1996; Serafini, 2000; Sipe, 1997). For quality literature discussions to take place, it has been suggested that teachers need to explicitly demonstrate how to discuss literature; increase students' awareness and understandings of the elements and structures of literature; help readers learn to generate, articulate, and negotiate interpretations in a supportive learning environment, and learn how to talk to classmates in a positive and effective manner (Maloch, 2004; Wienczek & O'Flahavan, 1994). However, a shift in instructional practices and resources, for example from the use of a basal series to authentic children's literature, must be accompanied by a parallel shift in theoretical perspectives for real change in the quality of students' literature discussions to take place (Serafini, 2003).

While the literature may be replete with suggestions for enhancing the quality of the



discussions that take place around children's literature, there has been less attention paid to the ways in which these pedagogical approaches and theoretical assertions may disable readers from effectively discussing literature. Certain instructional approaches, prescribed for use with literature discussion groups, may shift readers' attention away from the actual literature being read and focus instead on the roles and procedures that are to be enacted during the literature study discussions, the assessments being used or the dominant position of the interpretations offered by the teacher (Eeds & Peterson, 1997).

Classroom teachers should not assume that after choosing a piece of literature for students to read and organizing them into small groups they will be able to conduct a quality literature discussion: making personal and literary connections, investigating the author's style and intentions, and analyzing the elements and structures of the story being read. It takes a great deal of patience, and instructional support before students' literature discussions rise to the level classroom teachers have read about in the professional literature (Urzua, 1992). Maloch (2004) states, "implementing new approaches takes time and does not always translate easily into real-life classrooms with real-life students and teachers" (p.320). In other words, the journey into "grand conversations" is a challenging one that takes a great deal of support and encouragement (Eeds & Wells, 1989). Before discussing the impediments to quality literature discussions, it is important to consider the characteristics of quality literature discussions in order to develop a preferred vision for the types of interactions we hope to enact in elementary and middle school classrooms.

## Quality Literature Discussions Defined

Although there are many ways to evaluate the quality of a literature study discussion, there are some fundamental aspects that separate an informal chat from a quality, in-depth literature study discussion, or "grand conversation". Literature study groups are formed to explore texts, where talk is the keystone participants use for understanding the piece of literature and creating deeper, more sophisticated interpretations (Gilles, Dickinson, McBride, & Vandover, 1994). In a quality literature study discussion, readers are deeply engaged with the books they read and are eager to generate, share and negotiate meanings with the other members of their group (Peterson & Eeds, 1990). This sense of "investment" in the reading and group discussions is an important factor in determining the quality of these literary experiences. Literature discussions can take place in whole class interactions or in smaller literature study groups, usually with five to seven students.

Quality literature study discussions are filled with a variety of readers' perspectives and opinions about the books being read, where readers are interested in the meanings they construct and those meanings that are offered by other readers. It is the diversity of the ideas presented in literature discussions, rather than the group's ability to reach consensus and agreement that is essential for quality discussions. The subjugation of group members' interpretations to a single, correct main idea should not be part of these proceedings.

Literature study discussions should become literary exchanges where emotionally engaged readers passionately share and negotiate their understandings and interpretations concerning a piece of literature (Serafini, 2001). Throughout these small group discussions, interpretations are put forth and are made open for negotiation and revision (Karolides, 1992). The intended outcome of a quality literature discussion is for each member of the group to come away with a greater understanding of themselves and the literature being read. It is a synergistic event that demands readers' passionate attention to the piece of literature and to the various members of the discussion group.



Literature study discussions should become focused engagements where readers feel comfortable sharing their interpretations without fear of retribution from other group members or the teacher. Readers need to feel that they can discuss what really matters to them about a particular book, rather than search for a predetermined meaning that resides in the teacher's head or is contained in a commercial instructional manual.

In addition to the pedagogical approaches mentioned to support quality literature study discussions, educators have argued for attention to the social interactions and implications of community and democratic principles in literature study groups. Pradl (1996) suggests that literature study discussions provide students, "the opportunity to reflect on the values they hold and what their consequences might be as they live within the tensions of freedom and discipline, of personal desire and community control" (p.10). Drawing on the work of Rosenblatt, Pradl (1996) continues, "citizens in a democracy have the convictions and enthusiasms of their own responses, yet they are willing to keep an open mind about alternate points of view, and finally are able to negotiate meanings and actions that respect both individual diversity and community needs" (p.11).

Not only should literature be used as a window into the lives of others and as a mirror into their own lives and identities (Cullinan, 1989), but literature should create a theoretical space for readers to generate, articulate, and negotiate meaning in transaction with a particular text. Literature study discussions are social events, where readers bring their interpretations and responses to the group, to generate, articulate, and negotiate meaning in the company of other readers.

## **Theoretical and Pedagogical Impediments to Quality Literature Discussions**

The theoretical assumptions and instructional considerations that I suggest impede the evolution of quality literature discussions or grand conversations are as follows:

### Theoretical Considerations

1. the dominance of modernist literary theoretical orientations
2. overemphasis on personally constructed meanings and responses

### Pedagogical Considerations

1. prescribing roles for group participation
2. limited student and teacher experiences with literature

For each of the above mentioned theoretical and pedagogical considerations, I will offer an explanation concerning why I believe it to be a possible impediment to quality literature discussions, and some suggestions for overcoming them.

### *The Dominance of Modernist Theoretical Orientations*

Modernist literary theory has had an enormous impact on reading instruction in elementary and secondary classrooms (Bogdan & Straw, 1990). Closely associated with the New Criticism, a modernist theoretical orientation is based on the belief that meaning resides in the text and readers are expected to uncover this meaning during the reading event (Eagleton, 1996). It is asserted that there is one, stable meaning for each text, and individual's readings can be evaluated in comparison to this objective meaning. Only the most competent of readers, usually university professors and literary scholars, can ever truly understand the pure essence of a text, and all subsequent readings by individual readers can be measured against this purported true meaning (Probst, 1992).



One of the foundations of modernist literary theory that has translated into elementary and secondary reading and literature instruction is the concept of finding the main idea in a text through close, objective analysis. If this theoretical orientation is not made problematic, teachers may reduce literature study discussions to a procedure for identifying the single correct meaning that resides hidden in the bowels of the text, rather than a process of constructing meaning based on the experiences and understandings of the reader. This is what (Scholes, 1998) refers to as a “centripetal” force, driving interpretations to the center, searching for consensus and agreement.

Although there is an understandable temptation to adhere to the notion of looking for the main idea, largely due to issues of teacher control, standardized testing, and an emphasis on objectivity in assessing comprehension, the ensuing literature study discussions become focused on building a correspondence to an external authority’s interpretations rather than exploring alternative interpretations and possibilities. Students come to believe that the interpretations offered in resources like *Cliff Notes* are more important to read than the literature itself. It is this delegation of authority to an externally created and endorsed interpretation that undermines the potential and power of literature study groups.

As teachers begin making a theoretical shift towards a transactional (Rosenblatt, 1978) or socio-cultural theory of meaning (McKormick, 1994), the reader is given more voice and privilege in the process of constructing meaning in transaction with literature. Reader response (Beach, 1993; Tompkins, 1980) and socio-cultural literary theories (Gee, 1996) may provide a better foundation for quality literature discussions. According to reader response theories, readers bring a wealth of experiences and knowledge with them to the reading event in order to construct meaning in transaction with a piece of literature (Hunsberger & Labercane, 2002; Marshall, 2000; Rosenblatt, 1978). Readers are no longer conceptualized as passive recipients of a text’s meaning, rather, the variety of experience, culture and knowledge of each individual reader adds to the multidimensional texture of the literature discussions. It is this active role of the reader that adds to the dimensions and quality of their literature discussions.

From a transactional or reader response perspective, members of literature study groups are given permission to consider multiple interpretations and negotiate meanings with other group members, rather than reduce discussions to guessing what the teacher thinks or what has been designated as the correct interpretation in the teacher’s manual.

Working from a transactional theory of literary meaning, teachers assume the role of facilitator, or literary docent, guiding students through the lived through experience of reading a text, rather than the arbiter of meaning whose job is to decide who found the correct meaning and who didn’t. It is more important to understand and explore why readers constructed particular responses than to decide if they align to a predetermined interpretation offered in a commercially published novel unit. Teachers need to disrupt the commonplace notions of modernist theories of meaning and begin to explore the freedom and possibilities offered by transactional and reader oriented theories of meaning. The shift from a modernist orientation to a transactional or reader response perspective is an essential element in a more democratic discussion of literature, allowing more voices to be heard and interpretations to be expressed.

### *Overemphasis on Personally Constructed Meanings and Connections*

In addition, focusing on the reader’s responses to the exclusion of the text itself, and conceptualizing the reader as an autonomous individual unaffected by cultural, historical and social



factors and experiences, may diminish the nature and quality of literature study discussions. Rosenblatt (1985) warned us about focusing on the role of the reader to the exclusion of the text when she stated, “like the Rorschach inkblot, a verbal [or written] text may be used to stimulate personal ‘free’ associations and memories of childhood traumas. But this makes the text simply a passive tool in the psychological study of personality” (p. 36). For Rosenblatt, reading is an experience shaped by the reader under guidance of a text. She insists that her transactional theory is a “reader-plus-text” orientation, not simply a reader response theory.

Sloan (2002) warns us about reducing literature discussions to “superficial chat about readers’ aesthetic responses to a work” (p.25). Although personal response to a text is an essential component of the reading experience, it is only the beginning of the process of interpretation and literary analysis. Sloan (2002) continues, “narrow interpretation of Rosenblatt’s ideas left some teachers thinking their role was only to listen mutely as initial responses poured from the children” (p.28). In response to these assertions, the role of the teacher has shifted from controlling discussions to facilitating them, helping readers explore the structures and elements of literature in order to understand a story without destroying the enjoyment of reading it.

With the publication of *Mosaic of Thought* (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997), many classroom teachers began to focus on text to text, text to self and text to world connections. While *Mosaic of Thought* has been central in supporting teachers’ burgeoning awareness of comprehension strategies, expanding discussions beyond asking main idea questions, there is a problem with teachers requiring students to simply make personal connections to a text while disregarding the text itself in the process. Too often, classroom discussions seem to leave the book behind as readers make superficial connections to individual words or names in the text. Each personal and intertextual connection offered by readers should be evaluated based on how it helps readers more extensively understand a book and their experiences, developing more sophisticated interpretations and perspectives. This is not a shift back to the objective focus on the text of the New Critics, rather it is a call to remember that the text is not vacated during the literary experience.

Lewis (2000) has argued for teachers to consider not only the reader as an individual, but also as a culturally, historically and politically situated reader that brings not only individual experiences, but socially determined experiences that affect their responses to literature. It is important to conceptualize the reader, not simply as an individual responding to a text, but as a historical, socio-cultural being that brings past experiences, culture, gender and political history to every reading event. Lewis (2000) contends that the interpretation of reader response that is most frequently used to support literature study focuses on personal interpretations at the expense of the social and political manifestations of the reader and text. She encourages teachers to view the discussion of literature as a social, as well as a cognitive, act, helping readers understand where their responses are derived, and what factors influence those responses. Readers don’t read in a vacuum, nor do their responses arise in one. Readers read particular texts in particular contexts, bringing their historically, culturally and politically embedded experiences with them to the act of reading. Exploring these contextual factors expands the possibilities for literature discussion and helps readers understand the ways that texts affect them as human beings.

In order to conceptualize readers as historically, politically and culturally embedded readers, it is necessary to interrogate how particular interpretations are naturalized and seen as commonplace. Texts are written to set forth particular versions of reality, and it is through the interrogation of these realities that readers come to understand the genesis of their interpretations, and how they are positioned as readers of fiction in contemporary society.



### *Prescribing Roles for Literature Study Discussions*

In my opinion, one of the most challenging pedagogical approaches offered for supporting readers in literature study groups is the assignment of predetermined roles for members of literature study groups to adopt in order to attend to particular aspects of literature and literature discussions (Daniels, 2001). While it is commonsensical that readers need support in learning how to talk about literature, that support may better come in the form of helping them understand the elements and structures of literature, or what is referred to as “literary literacy” (Cai & Traw, 1997) prior to engaging in literature study discussions, rather than learning what role to assume after groups are organized.

According to Daniels (2001), roles are designated prior to the literature discussions and readers are required to adopt, rather than construct, these roles in discussing a piece of literature. When roles are imposed on literature study groups, readers may focus on adequately filling their role (as vocabulary monitor, question asker, summarizer and others) rather than responding and constructing interpretations in transaction with a piece of literature. An overemphasis on these predetermined roles may shift readers’ attention from making connections and constructing interpretations in response to texts, to simply searching for vocabulary words to look up, asking literal questions, worrying about whether the group is on task, or adequately summarizing the story. To his credit, Daniels (2001) has discussed the “jeopardy and joy of role sheets”, however, these role sheets continue to be included in his books on conducting literature study groups.

While each reader at different times during a literature discussion may, in fact, discuss vocabulary, summarize events in a story, ask questions or help facilitate the discussion, to assign these as individual roles limits each member’s participation in the group rather than supporting their interactions. Student led literature study groups require readers to assume a great deal of responsibility for the discussions, however, this responsibility cannot be bypassed by creating and assigning roles for group members. The predetermination of roles associated with literature study groups forces an “inflexibility” upon readers, narrowing their purpose and possibilities in the “transaction zone” (Smagorinsky, 2001). Roles that readers construct need to remain open for readers to reposition and reconstruct themselves in their interactions with other readers. Placing readers in predetermined roles cannot serve as an instructional shortcut to the time and support needed to help readers learn about the structures and elements of literature and develop the passionate attention needed to become effective members of a literature study group (Eeds & Peterson, 1997).

In order to support readers’ abilities to participate in literature discussions, a foundation needs to be constructed including; a deepening of their knowledge of the elements and structures of literature, the ability to interrogate and reflect on one’s initial responses to literature, the ability to discuss ideas effectively with other students, and the willingness to consider multiple perspectives and opinions. These abilities can be developed through whole group discussions, where teachers demonstrate the types of responses and interactions they want students to develop long before small group discussions are employed.

### *Limited Student and Teacher Experiences with Literature*

Another challenge in developing quality literature discussions is teachers’ and students’ lack of experience with reading and discussing literature. Nothing can substitute for time spent reading and



discussing literature. Readers need to be able to respond to literature aesthetically before they are required to evaluate the piece based on a particular literary criteria (Cox & Many, 1992). This requires extensive exposure to literature as a foundation for analysis and discussion. We can't simply expect teachers and students to talk about things they have not had experience reading. Literature needs to be experienced before it can be analyzed.

There has been a shift from developing teachers' understanding of the reading process, literary theories, theories of comprehension, and experiences with children's literature, to a focus on training teachers to implement a particular reading program in the past decade or more (Shannon & Goodman, 1994). As a consequence of the high stakes testing associated with the No Child Left Behind legislation and the National Reading Panel report, teachers are increasingly being required to follow an instructional script rather than make decisions themselves about what is important to teach readers (Allington, 2002). Because of these pressures, literature study has become a scripted routine in many classrooms, where some teachers, unfortunately, are leading discussions about books they have not even read themselves. Teachers are simply required to ask the requisite questions and assess the answers given by students according to criteria prescribed in a commercial reading program or novel unit. It is assumed that actual experiences with literature can be bypassed by scripting the procedures and predetermining the questions to be asked in literature study groups. In fact, many publishers of trade books often used in literature study groups are now including discussion questions in the book itself for teachers and students to use in their discussions, rather than allowing students and teachers to generate questions based on their readings of the text and their life experiences.

Teachers and students need access to literature and time to read and discuss literature regularly in schools. Because of the pressures associated with high stakes testing, teachers are focusing on the reading skills that will help their students do well on standardized tests. The effect of this concentration on test-based reading skills is the relocation of literature to the periphery of the reading instructional program. This focus on reading test skills limits the amount of time readers get to actually read and discuss literature. This, in turn, limits the experiences necessary for students and teachers to become more competent readers, interpreters, and evaluators of literature.

## **Concluding Remarks**

The focus of literature study groups should be on the aesthetic experience of reading a piece of literature and generating, articulating, and negotiating meaning within a community of readers. However, the initial response is only the beginning of the interpretation and analysis of literature. The exploration of literature should not be at the expense of enjoyment, rather it should enhance the experience, providing readers with the "textual power" (Scholes, 1985) necessary to interpret and understand literature for themselves.

In addition, we need to re-conceptualize the reader as a historical, political, and culturally embedded reader. A primary goal of reading literature is to change the reader's perception of self and other within the context of examining the structural inequalities within which cultural identities are constituted (Lewis, 2000).

As readers are drawn to a piece of literature in the company of other readers they learn to develop the language of critique necessary to delve deeper into literature and explore the multiple interpretations generated and offered by other readers. It is the energy created by the interactions of readers and quality literature that makes literature study discussions so exciting.



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