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Literature Groups and Literature Logs: Responding To Literature in a Community of Readers

Kathy Everts Danielson

Literature discussion groups

Literature discussion groups as a vehicle for discussing and responding to literature have recently received much attention as an alternative to basal reading groups. Though different names have been given to this type of group (e.g., Literature Circles, Conversational Discussion Groups, and Literature Study Groups), the basic premise for this grouping is the same: students work in heterogeneous groups to discuss the books that they are reading. This placement in groups is done randomly, or according to the number of students reading the same book at a given time. Students then discuss the book that they are reading in a shared reading community.

Recent research advocates this type of grouping. Harste, Short, and Burke (1988) described Literature Circles as open-ended discussions, focused on bringing the literature and the reader together. O'Flahavan (1988) described Conversational Discussion Groups as classroom discussions in conversational style. This type of conversation had the greatest effect on students' positive view of the usefulness of literature group discussions when used with

second graders. Eeds and Wells (1989) described how fifth and sixth graders shared personal stories, became active readers, evaluated the text as literature, and valued alternative views of literature when placed in Literature Study Groups.

Response to literature is an important aspect of literature discussion groups. As readers read quality literature and share their reactions to what they have read, further reading and writing is enhanced. Rosenblatt (1978) described the focus of reading as a transactional process. Meaning is simultaneously brought to the text and taken away from it in a personal manner. Students' responses to literature can show engagement in the form of personal involvement with the text, or can allow the reader to make inferences based on what is read. Responses can also be perceptive in nature, such as simply retelling the story, or more evaluative in nature, such as giving opinions about characters and the story in general (Purves and Rippere, 1968).

In order for honest response of literature to occur, there must be a trusting and supportive community for readers to respond within. Vygotsky (1978) discussed the necessity of social interaction for the support of learning. Atwell (1987) has referred to talking about books (in writing or orally) as required "literary gossip." Literary gossip must be grounded in a community spirit to flourish and grow. Although the teacher is a participant in this discussion of books, the teacher is not the only one asking or answering the questions that readers have about literature. Students have an active role in response to literature via literature discussion groups.

This collaborative social context for learning is important because “learners: 1) come to know each other; 2) value what each has to offer; 3) focus on problem solving and inquiry; 4) share responsibility and control; 5) learn through action, reflection, and demonstration; and 6) establish a learning atmosphere that is predictable and yet full of real choices” (Short and Pierce, 1990, p. 35).

Literature logs

Writing about literature has also been advocated as a way to link the processes of reading and writing and to encourage diversity of response: “The more opportunities that students have to read and to write about books, the deeper their responses to literature will be, and the likelier the chance that we will become partners in learning” (Pierpont, 1990, p. 105). Literature logs can provide the forum for this rich response to literature. Literature logs are a place for students to record their thoughts and impressions about the books that they are reading.

Logs and discussion groups in action

To allow for this rich response to literature in a community of readers, 22 fifth grade students from a small midwestern city kept literature logs while reading *The Not-Just-Anybody Family* (Byars, 1986). They were asked to write one question and one comment after reading each chapter of the book for use in a later literature discussion group. These groups were not homogeneous reading groups (i.e., they were not grouped according to ability), but rather randomly assigned groups of four to five students who talked about the book together with the teacher.

In order to understand the context of students’ comments and questions, a brief summary of the book is necessary.

The Blossom family consists of three children (Junior, Maggie, Vern), their mother Vicki (who is on the rodeo circuit in this book), and their grandfather Pap. In this book, Pap is arrested for disturbing the peace after he accidentally dumps 2,000 cans on a street in town. Meanwhile, the police come to the Blossom place while Junior is on the barn roof with cloth wings tied to his arms as he is about to see if he can fly. When Maggie and Vern (who are on the ground to watch Junior) see the police car, they run into the woods, leaving Junior to fend for himself. Junior jumps down from the roof, breaks both his legs, and ends up in a hospital where his roommate Ralphie develops a crush on Maggie when Maggie and Vern finally figure out that Junior is in the hospital. Maggie and Vern also try to help get Pap out of jail, by breaking into jail. And Mud, the family dog, tries to figure out where everyone went as he journeys around the area. The story winds up with Pap getting out of jail, Junior getting out of the hospital, Mud being found, and their mother returning home. The Blossom family celebrates by having fried shredded wheat with syrup.

Students' written responses in literature logs

After careful analysis of students' written responses in their literature logs, the following types of comments and questions were identified: 1) predictions; 2) text-related; 3) character involvement; 4) personal experiences; 5) language; 6) author; and 7) personal feelings. A description of each type of response and examples follow.

Predictions. Predictive comments and questions offered ideas of what might happen next in the text. As students read the book and recorded their questions and comments, they thought about what was coming up in the story. They examined chapter titles and made inferences about upcoming events. Below are some examples of the fifth graders' prediction questions and comments.

Where could Mud be?

Is there going to be another story about Maggie and Ralphie getting married?

Did they call this chapter "Bustin Open" because Ralphie's watermelon seed in his stomach is going to bust?

I was thinking before I read the whole chapter I was wondering what was wrong with him. (The chapter title was "Ralphie Goes To Therapy.")

I think Pap is going to find Mud.

The name of the chapter ("Rich and Special"), it sounded like Vern or Maggie was stuck up or something when I first looked at it.

Vicki Blossom is probably going to quit the rodeo.

Text-related. Text-related comments and questions focused on the plot of the story. Students wrote comments and questions about the length of the chapters and whether or not events in the story were realistic, and made inferences about the story based upon what they read. Examples of these types of questions and comments:

Where was the gun?

Why did they want to go through that small vent — they would probably get stuck?

How did he get in the hospital? (This was never stated in the book.)

What's a Winn Dixie?

Why would they walk across a board to break into jail when all they had to do was go inside to see Pap?

Where did the board come from?

This is the first time Vicki Blossom is really in the story.

Junior could have lay down on the barn so the police wouldn't see him.

I think walking on the plank is dangerous, but jumping off it!

Character involvement. There were many comments and questions that focused on the characters' development and motivation. Students also wrote about their involvement with the various characters:

*Why would Pap want to collect pop cans again?!?!
Did you notice that ever since Maggie got money from Vern she hasn't whined?*

Do you think Vern was very brave to break in to see Pap?

Is Junior jealous of Ralphie because of Maggie?

I think Maggie is not really in love with Ralphie she just wants him to do stuff for her.

I think Ralphie's jealous because everybody is visiting Junior.

I think that they are very silly to want to break into jail, but then again they love him.

I think Maggie was very smart to pull off what she did. (She sweet talked him.)

I think Maggie is turning weird because almost every time Ralphie says something she sighs or thinks something mushy in her head about Ralphie.

I like the way Vern soothes people.

Maggie is starting to like Ralphie.

I'm glad that Maggie stands up for herself now.

Personal experiences. Students also wrote about their own experiences that related to the story. They identified with the story and were reminded of similar incidents that had happened to them. Below are samples of their questions and comments.

Has anyone ever had fried shredded wheat?

Mud seems like a dog I know.

I know what Junior means when he said stiff and clean sheets. (p. 25.) When I was in the hospital I had stiff and clean sheets too.

I was in a hospital once and I felt just like Junior.

Junior's just like me when I want to stay awake for something special.

I have problems sleeping on Christmas Eve too.

Language. References were made to language and vocabulary in their comments and questions as well. Students noticed particular descriptive language that was effective and noted that in their responses. They also asked genuine questions about the words or concepts that they did not understand:

What's coma?

Does therapy hurt?

What does the verdict mean!!!

What is his Adam's apple and where did it come from?

On page 85 that was a good expression – wiggle-eel.

I thought it was funny when Maggie's eyes turned round like cartoon eyes.

It makes you feel hurry up run, run Maggie and Vern.

I think flip flops is a funny word.

I like it when the author used the impression, "His heart was pumping hard, like the machines he'd seen occasionally through the doors of Intensive Care."

It was funny when Maggie said Verrrrn.

I like when Junior said he didn't want to grin, but his lips did.

I thought that this must have been so exciting I can't put the book down. Also I thought that this chapter had a lot of exclamation marks.

I think it's funny when it says everyone was sleeping, snoring, snorting, and groaning in their sleep.

I just love it when the judge said, "Order in the court."

We got stuck on had had. (Students found a typographical error in this book and talked a lot about it.)

Author. Some students wrote questions and comments about Betsy Byars, the author, in their literature logs.

They developed a concept of the author as an authority on the characters and the story line. They thought about her motives for writing this story:

Why did Betsy Byars write this book?

How can Mrs. Byars make you feel frustrated with Junior?

I like how Betsy Byars makes me feel in this chapter.

Mrs. Byars makes all these chapters seem real.

I think Mrs. Byars made you want to touch or see everything in this story.

One student made a list of the things to ask Betsy Byars in a letter to her:

- 1) Tell her chapters that we liked.*
- 2) Ask her about the had had. (misprint)*
- 3) Ask her where the board came from. (breaking into jail)*
- 4) Ask her when she started to write.*

Own feelings. Students' own personal feelings were evident in their comments also. They wrote about how they felt as they were reading the book:

I think this was an emotional chapter.

I'm happy that they're all together again.

I cried a little this chapter.

I'm really crying now. It is really sad, but I'm happy for them.

I feel this had mixed feelings, sorry for Mud, happy for Pap, Vern and Maggie and happy and sad for Junior.

I think I'm going to love this book (I already do).

Now the whole family is together and I hope they will never be separated again.

Isn't it great to be together (end of book)!

I felt sad that Junior's dad died.

Percentages of responses. The percentages of the different types of responses in students' written questions and comments are included in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Percentage of Responses in Literature Logs

<i>Type of Response</i>	<i>Percentage of Questions</i>	<i>Percentage of Comments</i>
Predictions	7%	4%
Text-related	46%	34%
Character response	15%	27%
Own experiences	2%	6%
Language	28%	10%
Author	1%	1%
Personal feelings	1%	18%

The students' questions were mostly text-related, followed by language, character involvement, and predictions. Their comments were also mostly text-related, followed by character involvement, personal feelings, and language. They focused on the types of comments and questions that they could share with their discussion groups.

Summary and recommendations

Students' responses in the literature logs were genuine, honest and personal. They demonstrated evidence of comprehension and enjoyment. There were questions about plots, character development, and even the author's choice of words. Written comments and questions gave structure to the literature discussion groups and enabled students to participate in their community of readers.

The literature logs allowed students to write about what they read in a way that was meaningful to them. They provided for rich, deep, and diverse response to literature in a way that both enhanced and enriched the transactional act of reading. The following suggestions are offered for the use of literature logs and discussion groups: 1) *Grouping*

students according to the books they are reading, rather than by ability, can be effective. Students can be grouped together if they are reading the same book, a book by the same author, a book about the same character, or a book with a similar theme. For instance, one group of students might be reading a book about Anastasia by Lois Lowry, or a book about Ramona by Beverly Clearly. Students might be reading about a similar theme or setting, such as the prairie during the early 1900s by reading *Prairie Songs* (Conrad, 1985) and *Sarah, Plain and Tall* (MacLachlan, 1985). Or students could all be reading a book by the same author, such as Gary Paulsen's books. 2) *Providing some suggestions or prompts for writing facilitates student engagement in the literature logs.* Questions such as "How did this make you feel?" or "What might happen next?" help reluctant students to begin writing in response to literature. 3) *Groups work best with 4-6 students.* In order for a good discussion to occur, no more than six students should be in a group or one or two students can easily dominate the discussion. 4) *Literature group meetings can be held as often as the group deems necessary.* Students reading novels should meet at least once a week to discuss the chapters they are reading. Students reading picture books could meet several times in one week to discuss the book. The group can decide how often they would like to meet, depending upon how long the book is and how many chapters the book might have. 5) *The teacher's role is to facilitate discussion.* The literature log entries that the children have written will guide the discussion. 6) *The reading of good quality literature can add to the richness of the discussion groups.*

These suggestions can provide a framework for implementing literature logs and the discussion groups on which they are based. This format can be an effective way

of developing a community of readers – students making meaning of what they read in a collaborative social context.

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