

# Student-Centered Reading: A Review of the Research on Literature Circles

by Tanya Auger

Tens of thousands of teachers and millions of students now take part in student-centered literature circles, also called book clubs or literature study groups, and the research on this phenomenon is on the rise (Daniels, 2002). Studies have shown that when students are involved in authentic conversation about literature, they are more engaged in their reading (Alpert, 1987; Enciso, 1996), and they take more risks (Eeds & Wells, 1989). During small-group discussions, students voice emotional responses to literature (King, 2001). Literature circles also promote students' motivation to read and have been shown to improve students' reading levels and performance on tests (Davis, Resta, Davis, & Camacho, 2001). Another key feature of literature circles is the role they play in fostering and supporting personal and divergent interpretations of texts, which is the focus of this article.

In the effort to “get” an author’s meaning or, rather, what the teacher perceives to be the author’s meaning, students’ personal interpretations of literature may be lost or, worse, never elicited (Baker & Freebody, 1989; Hynds, 1992). When a teacher dominates a literature discussion, asking brief, “known-information” questions or applauding only certain responses to supposedly open-ended inquiries, students learn to seek the teacher’s understanding of the text rather than to construct their own interpretations (Alpert, 1987; Baker & Freebody, 1989; Hynds, 1992).

Researchers have concluded that when teachers and students engage in student-centered conversations about literature, different understandings of a text may be constructed and shared, yielding richer readings of a text (Eeds & Wells, 1989). Such peer-led conversations about literature require initial class discussions about the differences between authentic dialogue and traditional question/answer sessions. These initial discussions should also include teacher-modeling of authentic conversation (Raphael & McMahon, 1994). For example, rather than alternating speakers “round-robin” style, students can be guided to generate

questions that elicit elaboration, evidence, or alternative interpretations from their peers.

In describing the transition from traditional, teacher-led discussion to authentic, student-centered conversation, researchers have emphasized the teacher’s role in coaching students to examine and refine both their interactions with their peers and their interpretations of the text (Wiencek and O’Flahavan, 1994). This is a crucial factor, as some studies have revealed that students in peer-led discussion groups can recreate the one-dimensional discourse patterns found in traditional, teacher-led discussions rather than conversations in which multiple interpretations are offered and respected (Evans, 1996). Also, students who view themselves as weak readers or who have little or no experience in an interactive classroom are often uncomfortable with or resistant to student-centered dialogue (Wollman-Bonilla, 1994).

Such findings point to the need for careful scaffolding and coaching of students at an early age (Wiencek & O’Flahavan, 1994), as well as the importance of encouraging peer collaboration (Angeletti, 1991) and valuing students’ literary insights—even interpretations that appear idiosyncratic—in order to promote deeper and richer readings of texts (Hynds, 1992).

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This article originally appeared in the May 2003 issue of *EPS Update*, the electronic newsletter from Educators Publishing Service. For more information, visit [www.epsbooks.com](http://www.epsbooks.com) or call 1.800.225.5750.

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