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# Literature Circles: Encouraging Critical Literacy, Dual-language Reading, and Multi-modal Approaches

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## Introduction

Literature circles have the potential to move preservice Bachelor of Education students and high school students toward a critical literacy discourse that explores multiple perspectives offered in social issue texts. This paper uses a critical literacy framework to draw upon research linked with a SSHRC-funded study that examines learning in connection with Canadian fiction, as well as my own experiences as an educator to explore innovative approaches for university teacher-educators and teachers in high schools interested in using literature circles. By drawing upon the theoretical framework of critical literacy, teachers can expand their text selection to go beyond canonical texts to increase students' options by choosing literature that raises contemporary and historical issues of gender, ability, class, and race which—especially when read in tandem with critical literacy and literary theory—promotes social justice perspectives. Allowing students to choose their own subject and novel of interest within a smaller literature circle can effectively engage English Language Learners by using dual-language reading options. In addition, strategies for literature circles using multi-modal media, including visual arts, film, and digital mediums in juxtaposition with primary texts can be developed from a critical literacy perspective.

## The Role of Critical Literacy in Relation to Literature Circles

Many researchers discuss literature circles from a theoretical viewpoint in relation to Reader Response theory, often associated with Rosenblatt's (1995) transactional

theory (Bean & Rigoni, 2001; Glazier & Seo, 2005; Macy, 2004; Straits & Nichols, 2007). Within this theory, each “transaction” is a unique experience in which the reader and text continuously act and are acted upon by each other. Reader Response is a literary theory that is more easily accessible to students because it invites them to relate their own lives and personal views to the literature they read. While there are benefits to this approach, Reader Response tends to, as Luke (2000) contends, “sidestep a systematic analysis of the relations and fields of social, cultural, and economic power where people actually use texts. Perhaps these are deemed ‘too hot to handle’ in relation to local school boards and state educational politics” (p. 451). Luke notes that proponents of this theory claim it has “emancipatory power for individuals and socioeconomically marginalized groups” (p. 451), yet some educators critique it as being apolitical (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993; New London Group, 1996). Freebody, Luke and Gilbert (1991) argue that ideologies in texts remain covert and thus appear “natural” and, by extension, implicitly invite the reader’s reciprocation. Moreover, since ideological assumptions embedded in texts remain unexplicated, “student-readers’ sense-making procedures can be brought into alignment with those of the text without their awareness of participation in that procedure” (Freebody, Luke, & Gilbert, 1991, p. 441).

While Reader Response theory is advantageous in fostering individual engagement with texts and giving students more confidence in their own opinions, drawing upon a critical literacy approach using multiple perspectives may broaden students’ interpretations beyond the comfort zone of their own immediate lives. Critical literacy contextualizes literacy and literature in a social, political, and historical milieu, which in turn asks students to critique how texts reflect, reproduce, and challenge societal norms.

Lewis, Flint and Van Sluys (2002) characterize four key dimensions of critical literacy as: “1) disrupting the commonplace, 2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, 3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and 4) taking action and promoting social justice” (p. 382). Critical theorists view literacy as an important tool for people to be able to “read the world” (Freire, 1970; 1991).

Attaining this kind of literacy is a powerful way to counter the forces of hegemony, a difficult concept for many learners to grasp. Brookfield (2005) defines hegemony as the “belief systems and assumptions (that is, ideologies) that justify and maintain economic and political inequity” (p. 13). He goes on to say, “a central component of hegemony is the dissemination of an ideology that serves the interests of the few while purporting to represent the many” (p. 39). Hegemony is

the phenomena of accepting the inequities of the world, such as those created by a capitalist free market, because they seem normal and common sense to us.

As a culture, we are saturated in language, so it is difficult, if not impossible, to create an objective distance to interrogate the language that forms our belief systems. Critical literacy can lead to “both changing dominant discourses as well as changing which discourses are dominant” (Janks, 2000, p. 178). Through critical literacies, teachers may develop the capacity to critique existing social structures, problem-solve, and creatively envision alternative solutions (Gouthro & Holloway, 2011).

Readers need to be thinking critically about questions such as “how is the text trying to position me?” (Luke & Freebody, 1997). Luke and Freebody advocate grouping together texts for comparison purposes to create multiple perspectives. Hence, students compare, contrast, and come to their own conclusions through this way of highlighting distinct narratives on the same topic. A critical literacy approach seeks out voices in non-traditional canons to hear the narratives of peoples historically marginalized. Alternatively, readers can investigate how canonical texts can illuminate power relations in that particular cultural, historical, and political milieu. As Shor and Freire (1987) contend, the teacher as transmitter of knowledge is ineffective. Instead, a critical literacy approach advocates for first-hand experiential learning that is student directed .

In the remainder of the paper I explore how literature circles provide an opportunity for educators to work with students towards a critical literacy discourse. In this case, teachers provide a student-centered project in which, after given initial structure, students choose the novels, the media, and the literary theory approaches that best suit their needs as a small independent group within the class. Inclusive strategies for working with English Language Learners and pedagogical approaches incorporating “new literacies” with emerging technologies and visual arts are also considered.

### **Critical Literacy Meets Literary Theory**

I have been teaching for twenty-two years, with experience working in Canada and Colombia. Over the last four years as an Education professor, and in five years prior as an high school English teacher, I have been experimenting with what I think works in order to push previous conceptualizations of literature circles. While my examples and our SSHRC research focuses on Canadian experiences, the strategies for literature circles may be useful in various cultural contexts.

Literary theory is important because it makes teachers and students more aware of the ideological roots that shape their own sets of questions and answers about any particular text (Bonnycastle, 1996). By providing tools for students to extend their thinking through using a literary theory lens appropriate to their text, they are challenged to consider social issues in deeper ways and a larger cultural context (Appleman, 2000). Literary theories draw upon critical theories that have evolved from philosophy and sociology. While they may not understand all the complexities and nuances, I have found high school students are able to grasp the central tenets of critical theories such as Marxism, historical biography, feminism, post-colonialism, and New Criticism. Literary theory applies these broader theories to literature. It provides a wide range of theoretical lenses or multiple perspectives from which to analyze a text.

Literary theory and critical literacy relate in that they both examine power relationships and how literacy practices connect to socio-political contexts, thus providing important insights into issues of learning and citizenship. What opens up interpretation of literature through using literary theory is a greater understanding of how texts can be reflective of social practices within a particular society (Eagleton, 1983). Using critical literacy practices, a student is encouraged to investigate if a character's actions or disposition need to be interpreted in light of larger systemic institutional issues (for example, unfair advantages of social privilege). How do texts illustrate these real life dynamics? As Yukon writer Jessica Simon writes, "My books focus on the community carrying the story" (p. 28, interviewed May 27 2010). Indeed, many of the writers we have interviewed for the SSHRC grant have indicated that fictional narratives, as Garry Ryan (p. 5, interviewed May 28, 2010) notes, provide "a snap shot of the world ... the kind of society we live in."

The literature circle role of the historical/cultural locator implicitly encourages students to think about literary theories such as Marxism or feminism because they connect the novel to material, social contexts. For instance, when I have used Rohinton Mistry's (2002) *Family Matters*, a further understanding of the limitations placed on women in present-day India based on caste and gender leads some students to question the relation between larger societal practices and individual characters' motivations. VanSlyke-Briggs (2010) says that "women have multiple layers to their identities" (p. 33). She likens poetry to these layers of an onion being peeled, wherein certain layers may be more accessible to some readers. This reminds us about the complexities of identity in that like an onion, there is translucence in the layers, but not transparency, and there is no centre, no final essence. In a similar fashion,

identity in literature has many layers, which can be explored through the different lenses of literary theories. By teaching critical literacy in explicit ways, teacher-educators and high school teachers can better understand how many of the principles of literary theory are evident in critical literacy, and how critical literacy has practical applications for the classroom.

As discovered in our SSHRC study, one benefit of learners engaging with fiction is that they can be encouraged to think critically about social justice concerns that may be taken up in fiction, especially those dealing with contentious issues such as sexual orientation, ability, gender, or race. For example, in talking about what makes for powerful writing, author Rosemary Nixon (2010) says: Good stories contain conflict and complications. The powerful ones deal with aspects of life we as human beings don't always want to look at. Stories often evolve from a writer's inability to understand life: 'I don't understand why a child had to die. I don't understand why racism exists.'" (p. 40, interviewed November 16, 2010). Nixon's comment reflects how many Canadian writers will address social issues within their fictional stories, thus creating opportunities in literary discussions for debates about social values and ethical stances, which are necessary if students are to become engaged citizens. She notes elsewhere the importance of readers reading stories from a variety of viewpoints, from the bullied kid's point of view, or from a gay kid's point of view. The reader walks in someone else's shoes when s/he opens the pages of a book, when s/he enters that viewpoint. Writing well, so that a reader enters the character's life, is a powerful way to show that one's actions do impact other people." (p. 41)

In literature circles, it is important to include social issue texts. As Bigler and Collins (1995) point out, "these topics are too often omitted, at least in part, to avoid the difficult dialogues and 'dangerous discourses'" (p. 10). Yet there are advantages to taking on difficult work. As Clarke's (2007) research shows, for example, by choosing to directly address gender issues through text selection, she was able to "raise student awareness about how they enacted gendered roles and how stereotypes influenced their own interactions" (p. 121). Yoon (2010) drawing upon Gates and Mark states, "It is important to select a multicultural book by looking at whether 'it will challenge the status quo of the more traditional canon, and thus further challenge the social structures embedded with in schooling and creating a potential model for social justice'" (Gates & Mark, 2006, p. 5, as cited in Yoon, 2010, p. 116). Social issue texts give personal testament to the effects of hegemony in our society, and they may help develop empathy in readers for viewpoints distinct from their own. While talking

about controversial issues is never easy, it may be more effective in the small group structure of literature circles.

Many of the preservice Bachelor of Education students I teach express both excitement and fear about trying to engage their future students in potentially controversial topics and social issue texts. We talk about strategies to allay parental and administrative concerns such as writing to parents ahead of time to state which issues may come up and why such text selections are pedagogically sound. It is an advantage that students have some choice in which novel they will read for the literature circle. As Daniels (2002) writes, “for reading to become a lifelong habit and a deeply owned skill, it has to be voluntary” (p. 19). In having this choice, they are given some agency in terms of which social issue they will read about. I believe primary texts *should* challenge secondary students to think about difficult social issues, hopefully in complex ways.

### **Diversity & Citizenship Issues in Fiction**

The literary voice in fiction is important for understanding our identities as citizens in ethnically and culturally diverse societies. For example, the 2006 Census enumerated an estimated “6,186,950 foreign-born people in Canada. They accounted for virtually one in five (19.8%) of the total population, the highest proportion in 75 years” (2006, Census of Canada, Statistics Canada). This diversity is reflected in school populations. Even in more homogenous environments, students need to be aware of what it means to live in culturally and linguistically rich societies. In our SSHRC study, we explore how educators, adult learners, writers, and publishers use fiction as a means to problematize stereotypes of diversity. As Janks (2000) posits, “Difference increases the creative resources that students can draw on” (p. 177). One of the “key informants” in our study, while discussing a program designed to encourage immigrant youth to engage with fiction writing explains that the “focus is on creating a literature of Toronto [Ontario]...a lasting literature that’s as diverse as the city itself” (p. 5, interviewed on March 2, 2010). Citizenship, understood here as more than just a function of voting, is recognized as a deeply embedded part of individuals’ identities. By giving New Canadians the opportunity to engage in creative writing, they develop their capacities for reflecting upon and becoming more cognizant of the impact of immigration in their lives and hopefully are able to better adapt to living in a new culture.

In literature circles, when students take risks by voicing opinions about fiction that may be unpopular, their personal interaction with the text writes them into



the script of the group discussion in particular ways. Students should thus be given multiple opportunities to revise their thought process in relation to the text. I use free writes and sometimes web postings to give them space away from their peers, and as a chance to consider their thoughts and opinions separately from the group. Literature circles open up potentially risky discussions that can feel empowering, or alternatively, intimidating for students and teachers.

Drawing on Smith (1998), Hamilton (2004) notes, “Smith critiques aspects of a reader-response approach to teaching literature and emphasizes his belief that teachers need to find ways to sensitively reject student responses to literature that represent ‘superficial associations’” (Smith, 1998, p. 121, as cited in Hamilton, 2004, p. 108). Hamilton gives an example of how a literary discussion examining the social interactions of a same-sex couple is deeply affected by his questioning techniques:

I remember how careful I had to be during one of our class discussions of *Jack* when the students’ general responses to the gay character after he kissed another man in public became judgmental. The kiss takes place in a public space, a bowling alley, and is observed by the character’s son and a group of his high school friends. Several of the students shared their opinion that the father had let his son down because he had embarrassed his son in public. I shifted the focus of the conversation away from the father and asked why the author might have written that scene into the story. The conversation took a completely different turn. Suddenly, the heat was no longer on the character but turned to a social critique of why a man and a woman can kiss in public but a man and a man cannot. (p. 108)

In this instance, the conversation went beyond personal reactions and close reading techniques to examine how society pressures people in varying degrees into shifting positions of power and oppression. The father character now has a staged identity, which serves to broaden how students problematize accepted societal norms. Whether or not students identify themselves as sexual minority youth, they can all perhaps feel safer discussing GLBTQ issues by reflecting on the literature circle novel rather than expressing an opinion that exposes information about their own personal lives.

While recognizing that in other countries dealing with controversial issues such as sexual orientation is more difficult to do within a schooling context, in my province of Ontario current policy guidelines (*Realizing*, 2009, p. 6) obligate *all* teachers to create an atmosphere in schools that protects and welcomes people of diversity. Sexual orientation is explicitly named under diversity. Furthermore, this document states: “Our schools should be places where students not only learn about diversity but



experience it. We know that when students see themselves reflected in their studies they are more likely to stay engaged and find school relevant” (p. 17). In tandem, teacher federations provide GLBTQ curricula kits and professional development. Grace and Wells’ research (2005 & 2006) focuses on the rights of sexual minorities under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Constitution, 1982), education policy directions, and school realities. Teaching GLBTQ issues is without doubt still controversial; however, school policies and federal laws in Canada clearly support the rights of the GLBTQ community to participate in and feel safe and included in schools.

Beck (2005) comments that “the ability to meet the challenges of implementing critical literacy in their classroom is facilitated when teachers are provided with support from other critical literacy practitioners” (p. 396). When preparing preservice Bachelor of Education students to work in the schools, teacher-educator faculty have a responsibility to introduce them to critical theoretical approaches, to model pedagogical practices that raise challenging questions, and to incorporate literature that is representative of diverse perspectives. McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004), using a critical literacy approach, suggest expanding Rosenblatt’s theory to include a critical stance that raises “questions about whose voices are represented, whose voices are missing, and who gains and who loses by the reading of a text” (p. 53). These questions frame a critical literacy approach.

### **Dual-Language Reading Approach to Literature Circles**

I have also experimented with broadening students’ engagement with literary texts through a dual-language reading approach. When I taught English as an Additional Language to newly arrived immigrants to Canada, it was challenging to use literature even if their English was good, mostly because of the elusiveness of metaphor and tone (which aptly describes most literature). Yet, when I gave them examples from Canadian literature, these students would respond in kind by referring to literature written in their native tongue to convey ideas when we talked about cultural mores and national identity. It was the impetus for me later on to offer novels in literature circles that could be read in two languages.

Based on my initial survey of a class, I find out students’ linguistic backgrounds to determine which novel(s) for the literature circles I might offer in dual languages. In a qualitative study of English teachers’ text selections, I and Greig (2011) discovered that high school librarians are often one of the best allies for teachers wanting to purchase small quantities of a particular book. When I taught in high

schools myself, I would also often lend students my own copies. If the linguistic demographics in a high school are such that the English teacher knows s/he will probably have some students whose first language is Spanish, Farsi or French, for example, a novel could be chosen with this in mind. In current global markets, it is easier to obtain novels in their original languages. Precisely because the configuration of literature circles demands small numbers of each novel, I use contemporary social issue texts. They do not require the department investing money in a class set, and it allows for exchanging for new novels each year. However, for multiple perspectives and the exploration of societal power relations to be evident in the classroom, critical literacy practices need to also be used with canonical texts throughout a course, or we risk turning social issue texts into the “exotic other.” It is a tricky balance to ensure non-dominant groups are represented in curricula, but not in an isolated fashion. Milner and Milner’s (2007) suggestion is to “pair” traditional and contemporary texts as a critical form of offering multiple perspectives.

The idea of a dual-language literature circle is that each student reads the novel in the language of their choice. For instance, I have used Allende’s (1982) Spanish novel *The House of the Spirits* or Hébert’s (1973) French novel *Kamouraska*. When I have done this with preservice Bachelor of Education students, some who elected to read the novel in the original had English as their first language, saw this as an opportunity to maintain fluency in the other language. This dual-reading approach allows students who are struggling with English to enjoy reading in their native tongue, while also sharing their linguistic and cultural heritage with other students in the literature circle. I have observed students discussing key phrases and the effects that a translation to another language can have on the meaning of a novel.

One of the most difficult aspects of literary analysis for students is to be able to effectively identify and analyze tone. If the tone is ironic, playful, or resentful, and the reader does not pick up on this inference, then the reader’s analysis will be inaccurate. To negotiate how tone is captured in distinct languages augments students’ abilities in the subtleties of rhetoric. Translation is a meta-cognitive activity (Cummins, Bismilla, Cohen, Giampapa, & Leoni 2005; Cummins, 2007). Students must grapple with how culturally embedded language is. The English Language Learner (ELL) has the power to explain cultural perspectives evident in the novel. For example, one literature circle using Allende’s novel had students examining the “suspense of disbelief” necessary to read a text using magic realism. The Spanish-speaking student was quick to point out how folkloric superstitions and environmental factors (such as earthquakes and volcanic eruptions) are embedded in the cultural fabric of Latin

America in a way that Canadians are simply not used to. She explained that it was not authorial exaggeration, and that the writing was reflective of material realities. Students were forced to defamiliarize their notions of normal. Analyzing cultural mores provides insight into literary matters such as characterization, humour, and thematic inquiries.

Significantly, if there is only one student in the literature circle who reads the novel in the original language, others see that student as an asset—someone who brings new insight because of his or her multiple language background (Cummins, 2007). This is an opportunity to draw on that student’s native tongue to progress with the target language (English). As Cummins notes, what is crucial to the learning process for the brain is the opportunity to bridge between prior knowledge and new concepts, regardless of whether prior knowledge is encoded in another language. Prior knowledge can greatly vary amongst ELLs depending on the student’s ethnic and socio-economic background, age at time of immigration, and previous formal academic education (Gunderson, 2008). Essentially, the literature circle is a scaffold for the ELL student to bridge between two languages in an authentic activity, building literacy through literary analysis.

High school teachers may worry that students should only be reading books in English in an English class. However, to allow them to read one book in their native tongue in tandem with other students reading it in translation, can only affirm their sense of identity and belonging in the school and help them to compare their reading and writing experiences in two languages. ELL students still participate in the discussion and write their reflections in English. Offering this opportunity is a way for teachers and students to genuinely welcome other cultures into the classroom, rather than just paying lip service to the idea. In our local school board in Windsor, Ontario, we have over 207 nations represented (Greater Essex County District School Board minutes, 2006, Oct. 4), which confirms the need to actively figure out how cultural diversity can be brought into schools. Both ELL and native English speakers come away from the experience of dual-language literature circles with a heightened sense of language, which may encourage all students to think about the advantages of being able to read, write, and think in multiple languages.

### **Multi-Modal Approaches in Literature Circles**

Adding a multi-modal element to literature circles makes the reading experience more dynamic. Using a multi-modal approach offers more interesting possibilities for the portfolios used to evaluate students’ literature circle work. Students select,

compare, contrast, and synthesize media from a variety of multi-modal settings. As Lea and Street (2006) note, students then have the tools to see that “meanings are negotiated through engagement in written and multimodal texts in specific and localized contexts” (p. 376). What students immediately asked for when I first used a multi-modal approach was the freedom to choose for themselves; they understood the context of their discussion in some ways better than I did and what multimodal approaches would best serve them. What I emphasize to the students is that there are no “Coles Notes” of how to read Holman’s *The Dress Lodger* in relation to a painting such as “The Scream” by Munch (1893). Therefore, their analyses also become multi-modal, and they gain expertise in “reading” different kinds of media in relation to one another.

Literature circles that analyzed *The Frozen Thames* by Humphreys (2007), *Anil’s Ghost* (Ondaatje 2000), and *Monkey Beach* (Robinson 2000) were all drawn to the Internet. They found fascinating YouTube videos to reveal the significance of allusions. For example, in *The Frozen Thames*, where each vignette represents one of the forty times the Thames river has ever frozen over, the “1784” vignette makes reference to *Hasenpfeffer* (p. 137). The literature circle found a YouTube video of the old 1970’s show “Laverne & Shirley,” wherein they refer to *Hasenpfeffer*. This comparison led to a whole discussion of how it is often *in the details* of any text that we get clues to social class. *Hasenpfeffer* is a German rabbit stew. The vignette, told from a wife’s perspective, recounts how her husband hunted the rabbit down on the Thames that day, serving as an indication that these are working-class characters. Students then compared how in “Laverne & Shirley” they sing a song from an old hopscotch diddy, and the German, immigrant phrasing, along with their dress style, also suggests blue-collar workers. Students reading *The Memory Keeper’s Daughter* by Edwards (2005) noted that they understood the use of photography in the novel better after talking about the opening film shots in *Cinema Paradiso*. This juxtaposition of media pieces with the novel significantly deepens students’ insights and challenges them to think more about how metaphor in photography functions in the novel’s narrative, creating silences and gaps in whose story gets told and from which perspective.

## Conclusion

Literature circles can be an effective venue, not only for promoting independent reading skills in the high school or preservice Bachelor of Education classroom, but also for promoting a greater critical awareness of social issues discussed in literature, and shaping curriculum in ways that gives students more choice in what they study.

Over the last ten years, my experience with literature circles has been exciting because each year changes significantly, as the composition of the class and their different interests and abilities come to bear on the reading process. Applebee, Langer and Nystrand's (2003) study reveals that extended conversations on certain themes deepen discussions in literature courses. Further, they suggest that "the most effective curricula were organized around specific topics that unified the reading, writing, and discussion that took place over a semester or a year" leading to what they term as "circular conversations" that evolve over time (p. 692). Literature circles, used in conjunction with portfolio assessments, contribute to in-depth discussions juxtaposed against other activities, allowing students time to ponder their responses. It has to be qualified that these literature circles act as a prelude to critical literacy and engaging in action that directly links theory to practice. But before practice can be done meaningfully, there needs first to be some awareness of larger ideological frameworks. In this paper, I have theorized my own experiences as an educator of designing and implementing literature circles within the framework of critical literacy and literary theory. I read these personal experiences within the context of our current SSHRC study on finding a Canadian "voice" to emphasize the broader implications for citizenship and identity formation through using innovative pedagogical approaches that draw upon literature to prompt discussions of social issues. Preservice Bachelor of Education students and secondary school students live in demanding times and are impacted daily by a globalized society. This paper advocates for students to conceptualize ideological critiques of critical literacy and literary theory, work through contemporary social issue texts, and engage in dual-language readings and multi-modal approaches to literature. These aspects of literature circles encourage students to become experienced citizens that place high intellectual demands upon the educational and learning process.

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