
Democracy & Education

Supporting Students' Choice and Voice in Discovering Empathy, Imagination, and Why Literature Matters More than Ever A Response to *Last Year's Choice Is This Year's Voice: Valuing Democratic Practices in the Classroom through Student-Selected Literature*

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Abstract

This article explores why we need to be intentional about the literature we explore in our English language arts classrooms. It explores the question of what literature should be considered and strategies for using democratic practices in support of literature circles. It also reinforces the importance of collaborative practitioner research to explore curriculum decisions and classroom practice to ensure we are meeting the needs of the diverse students with whom we work.

This article is in response to

Boatright, M. D., Allman, A. (2018). Last Year's Choice Is This Year's Voice: Valuing Democratic Practices in the Classroom through Student-Selected Literature. *Democracy and Education*, 26(2), Article 2. Available at: <https://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol26/iss2/2>

IN THESE FRACTIOUS times, reading literature is more important than ever:

We need literature to learn to get along. Literature and life converge in the field of human relationships. What characterizes quality literature—refusal to stereotype or generalize, fidelity to the whole complicated truth in all its breadth and subtlety, energy and inventiveness, eloquence, paying careful attention, discomfort at pat answers, and a generosity and sympathy with others—also characterizes thoughtful life. (Gillespie, 1994, p. 21)

The article “Last Year’s Choice Is This Year’s Voice: Valuing Democratic Practices in the Classroom Through Student-Selected Literature” (2018) provided compelling evidence that the high school students in this case study discovered important lessons about their own lives and empathy for the challenges faced by characters in the texts they chose to read and discuss. Literature develops students’ thinking in different ways than other types of reading:

[S]tudents learn to explore possibilities and consider options; they gain connectedness and seek vision. They become the type of literate, as well as creative, thinkers that we’ll need to learn well at college, to do well at work, and to shape the discussions and find solutions to tomorrow’s problems. (Langer, 1995, p. 2)

In responding to this case study of democratic practices in support of literature exploration, I build on the question of what

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literature secondary students should read, followed by a discussion of literature circles and how to move beyond “restrictive protocols” in support of student-controlled discussions, an issue raised by the empowered students in this study. I conclude with a celebration of the collaborative practitioner research that produced this important case study.

What Literature Should Secondary Students Read?

As the authors (Boatright and Allman, 2018) of the case study noted, the Committee of Ten’s canon continues to dominate the literature taught in secondary schools. A brief look at the history of the canon provides a context for the current debate about reliance on the canon.

The Committee of Ten, which operated from 1892 to 1894, was charged by the National Education Association with the examination of secondary-school curriculum in nine subject areas. Regarding literature, the goal was to compile a single reading list rather than continuing the practice of each college issuing its own list of books that would be tested on the college’s entrance exam, a practice which left secondary teachers scrambling to prepare students to read all books on each college’s list. The list developed by the committee was then adopted by the National Conference on Uniform Entrance Requirements in English. By 1899, the list had become the canon and dominated the English curriculum in secondary schools (Chandler, 1997, p. 11) As Boatright and Allman (2018) noted, this is still true today.

At the time, secondary teachers did not universally embrace the canon. They questioned why no secondary teachers had been involved in the process of creating the canon, and they questioned whether some of the titles in the canon were appropriate for their secondary students. This opposition led to the founding of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) in 1911 (Chandler, 1997, p. 11).

Early NCTE members questioned whether any one list should address the needs of all secondary students (Chandler, 1997, p. 11). This discussion about what literature secondary students should read and who should decide continues to be debated.

In a recent interview, high school teachers Jazmen Moore (Chicago Math and Science Academy) and Crystal Beach (Buford High School in Georgia), who serve on the NCTE Committee Against Racism and Bias in the Teaching of English, addressed the canon and the question of whose voices are missing. Beach described some of her students and their assumption they are not good at English language arts: “They already feel defeated. And that whole mindset is my challenge—to make sure that students feel connected. If we don’t invite new texts into our classrooms, we lose those kids.” Moore added:

For our students who have not grown up reading texts that show a reflection of who they are, what does it mean when there are definitely texts out there that are representing them? I don’t want to be complicit in the oppression of my students. . . . I don’t want to add to the silencing that goes on with our youth. (Barnwell, 2018, p. 11)

Boatright and Allman (2018) addressed the issue of the canon, noting that canon texts continue to be what fills our secondary

school bookrooms. Clearly there is an economic issue when making literature decisions; we need to use the resources we have at our schools. Boatright and Allman also argued for the canon’s role in establishing a “common set of knowledge upon which to understand history, language, and culture, with all its foibles, problems, and inconsistencies” (p.2).

I was impressed by the examples of how the canon text chosen by the students in this case study, *As I Lay Dying*, provided opportunities for the students to explore issues of death and poverty and develop empathy for characters. These text-self connections are why we read. As Lester (2007) noted, “Books enable us to experience what it is like to be someone else. Through books we experience other modes of being. Through books we recognize who we are and who we may become.”

I appreciate that Boatright and Allman (2018) are proponents of “critical habits of reading” (Bomer, quoted in Boatright & Allman, 2018, p. 3), encouraging students to make “powerful evaluative claims about these books and how these books are and are not representative of their own life experiences” (p. 3). I wonder about expanding on “critical habits of reading” by inviting students to critique the canon. Students could first examine the lists of texts they generated for this case study and research each author’s gender, race, and sexual orientation. They could then examine a list of traditional canon texts using these same author categorizations (see Greenbaum, 1994, for further exploration of this process). Students would then construct their own classroom canon, critiquing the “world [each] author presents” (p. 3), with the goal of including a range of texts that reflect culturally diverse and gender-balanced worlds.

Young Adult Literature

Boatman and Allman (2018) presented a strong case for the inclusion of young adult literature in the secondary classroom:

Because popular culture can play a powerful role in shaping desire and taste, readers of the genre need to evaluate for themselves the merits of the narratives they read, join in dialogue with authors, and be able to question the realities presented and whether those realities in any way match their own. (p. 3)

I appreciate the recognition that in addition to critiquing young adult literature for how it does or does not reflect the adolescent readers experiences, we can see how young adult literature can serve as scaffolding for reading classic (canon) texts. I was heartened to see that in discussing this scaffolding, Boatright and Allman (2018) noted that the young adult book the students chose, *The Monstrumologist*, was not an “easy read.” This young adult novel offered challenging vocabulary and a complex narrative structure (p. 4).

Young adult literature should not be dismissed as easy reading not worthy of close examination. Yes, it can be paired with classic-novel reading and serve as a scaffold. But young adult literature can also be read on its own in support of literary analysis. Many young adult novels provide excellent opportunities to explore the critical habits of reading we want students to develop

and support their exploration of history, language, and culture in support of democratic practices:

The breadth and depth of young adult literature are equal to any other genre today and . . . the recurring themes of love, death, loss, racism, and friendship contained in the classics are also present in young adult literature. (Santoli & Wagner, 2004, p. 68)

The Challenge of Supporting Democratic Practices through Literature Circles

Literature circles provide a communal opportunity for students to examine a text. “In reading together, individuals’ literary interpretations as well as their worldviews and interpretative lenses become public and, therefore, open to reexamination” (Park, 2012, p.194). Boatright and Allman’s (2018) case study illustrated the power of this communal opportunity to support students engaging in “a conversation in which their questioning is tantamount to the critical reading of texts” (p. 3). As one of the students in the case study described, “The perfect literature circle would involve a group of active participants who offer valuable opinions” (p. 5).

I have experienced literature circles that did not live up to my idealized vision of students discussing literature as a “group of active participants who offer valuable opinions” (Boatright & Allman, 2018, p. 5). I wrote about my failure to create and sustain meaningful literature circles in *Oops: What We Learn When Our Teaching Fails* (Power & Hubbard, 1996). Thus, I appreciate the candor of Boatright and Allman (2018) in sharing the power and possibility of literature circles (which includes their students’ approval of this structure for literature exploration) but also the practical challenges of implementing literature circles (the restrictions students experienced with the literature circle protocols) and the students’ request for more accountability (for themselves and their groups members). The issues of structure and accountability are at the heart of my own story of literature circle failure in a rural high school.

Literature Circle Structure

Structures and routines are critical for successful literature circles. But literature circles are also designed to support genuine conversations about books to expand students’ thinking. Kittle (2012) proposed a view of reading that helps students see the “gifts that authors ease into books” (p. 99). This new way of seeing is based on “discovery,” Kittle wrote, emphasis in the original, and continued, “We cannot be told. We must seek it.” (p. 99). Kittle went on to ask, “How can I set up conditions that lead them to discover?” (p. 99).

As Boatright and Allman (2018) noted in their case study, choice of books is the foundation for this discovery. Choice is a foundation for democratic teaching practice. “All voices must come to the table in the decision-making process” (p. 2). The students in this case study demonstrate the power of having their voices heard. As one student noted, “Books chosen by the students keep them engaged in their education” (p. 2).

Structuring the groups comes next. Boatright and Allman (2018) proposed a group size of three to six students. My experience has been that a group of four is ideal, although not always

possible. Steineke (2002) has recommended that students practice collaborative work in pairs before moving into literature circle groups. She also recommended groups of four, observing, “When there are five or more people in a group, someone always gets left out because, typically, the others are not doggedly attentive enough to continually bring the reticent person back into the discussion” (p. 108).

Boatright and Allman (2018) noted how they built on students’ collaboration skills (which were taught to students as part of schoolwide leadership initiative) by utilizing Daniels’s (2002) roles for their literature circle work. Some students in the case study found these roles helpful, including “striving readers” and “those with special needs” (p. 5). But my experience reflects the feedback of the other students in this case study regarding the desire for “even more freedom than was available using literature circle roles” (p. 5). So, how do we support students in “discovering” the text without prescribing roles to focus their attention, and hold them accountable for closely reading the text?

Providing Structure that Supports “More Freedom” and “Accountability”

Boatright and Allman (2018) highlighted the goal of encouraging students to be “text critics, by reading, questioning, and analyzing the author’s message” (McLaughlin & DeVogd, quoted in Boatright & Allman, 2018, p. 3). This goal is supported by providing scaffolding for students in support of reading texts as well as structures and routines that capture their thinking as text critics, so they can voice their discoveries about the reading with their literature circle members. In this section, I share teacher scaffolding and modeling for literature circles as well as strategies for students to capture their thinking in response to the texts they chose.

Teacher Support

Boatman and Allman (2018) discussed scaffolding to “provide students with a framework for thinking” about texts (p. 4). Providing questions for students to consider as they read is another form of scaffolding in support of literature circle discussions. Kittle (2012) used the questions and prompts listed below to support students in writing about their individual choice of reading books. But these could also be used in support of “thought logs” or quick-writes before the literature circles.

- *Tell about the narrator of your book. Is he or she believable?*
- *How has the author taken a flat portrait of a character and added flesh and bones? What are the moments that define a character you’ve connected to?*
- *Discuss the pace of the book. How fast or slow is the plot moving and how does that impact your enjoyment of the story?*
- *Trace the changes of a central character. (Kittle, 2012, p. 103)*

Gallagher (2015) reminded us that even though the students are the active participants in the literature circles, we can provide

instruction to support their efforts. He suggested a mini-lesson in support of questions that get at the big ideas of the book, asking students to consider one of more of the following:

- *What is worth talking about?*
- *What does the author want us to think about?*
- *What is a big idea that is hiding in this book?* (Gallagher, 2015, p. 202)

He also recommended teaching mini-lessons to support discussions, such as recognizing writer's craft.

Supporting Students as “Text Critics”

One of my failures with literature circles was not being explicit about student preparation for the literature circle discussions; each student needs to capture their thinking about the book. This focus on capturing thinking is consistent with the democratic practices in the study: Students choose what to focus on in the text, and each student has the opportunity and expectation to share their thinking. It also addresses the case study students' call for accountability, as the preparation will be shared with literature circle members and can be collected as formative assessment by the teacher. Listed next are brief descriptions of strategies that support students' development of their own thinking as text critics to share in their literature circle conversations:

Make their thinking visible.

Students write in thought logs (composition books), and their logs are brought to the book club discussion. Students also share sentences from the book to “exhibit beautiful craft” (Gallagher, 2015, p. 202).

Quote and question.

Each book club member writes down or marks a quote from the text that students finds striking. The students also craft questions about the text they think are worthy of discussion; these questions can be about the quotes they selected or other topics of interest. It is important to model the selection of a quote and the framing of a question for students and have them practice this strategy prior to using it with literature circles (Campbell, 2007, p. 29). I have found two-inch arrow-shaped sticky notes support this strategy. Each student uses an arrow note to mark the place in the text for the quote and writes the question on the sticky note.

Literature circle discussion notes.

This format builds on Daniels's roles, but students prepare for each element, so there is typically too much to discuss, which “forces students to choose the most promising items when it is their turn to contribute” (Steineke, 2002, p. 140).

Questions.

What would be interesting to discuss with others? Your questions need to reflect your thoughtfulness after reading and have the potential for extended discussion and follow-ups. Note the page number for each question. Below the original question, write three potential follow-ups you might use.

Passages.

Pick passages that seem especially important, interesting, or puzzling. Record the page numbers, passage locations, and three potential follow-up questions that could direct thought and conversation about your passage. Be ready to read the passages aloud and explain why you chose them.

Connections.

What does this story remind you of? Does it make you think of another story or novel you've read? An incident from your own life? Something in the news? A television program, movie, play? Jot down the specific connections and notes that explain them. Be ready to talk about them and tell your group the whole story.

Illustration.

On a plain sheet of paper, sketch a picture related to your reading. This can be a drawing, cartoon, diagram—whatever. You can draw something that's specifically talked about in the reading, or something from your own experience or feelings, something the reading made you think about. On the back, jot down the pages you were thinking about and some notes about the novel. (Steineke, 2002, p. 142)

More Accountability

In addition to supporting students in developing their thinking to share in literature circle conversations, it is helpful to provide reflections after literature circles meet to check for accountability. In the case study, some students wanted “more teacher-directed checkpoints, such as reading quizzes” (p. 5). But “teacher-directed” reading quizzes are inconsistent with the democratic practices that serve as the foundation for this case study: encouraging students to develop their own responses to the text. One possibility is student-generated quizzes. I have had some success with students creating their own reading quizzes for their literature circles. My process for this varies, but one strategy is each student crafts a quiz about an identified section of the reading and brings the quiz to share at the beginning of the next literature circle. Students then exchange their quizzes with other group members and take each other's quizzes. Students are given the option to “challenge” a quiz question if they have concerns about its framing. Beyond quizzes, I have listed below a few options teachers can use in support of accountability:

1. Collect the book club preparation strategies described in the section before.
2. Sit in on a book club discussion and take notes (Gallagher, 2015, p. 202).
3. Conduct conferences with individual students to check on the student's individual understanding and perception of the group (Gallagher, 2015, p. 202).
4. Use a literature circle accountability rating sheet for your own observations and ask students to self-evaluate using the same rubric. Possible rubric categories are:
 - a. Shared quotes from the text
 - b. Posed questions
 - c. Responded to other group members' questions
 - d. Focused on group members when they were talking
 - e. Posed follow-up questions

See Steineke (2002) for examples of literature circle accountability rubrics.

A more time-consuming assessment method is to have groups record their literature circle discussions. My experience has been that for some students the recording does not support free-flowing conversation. But it does provide the opportunity for me to hear the full discussion, and this can support accountability.

Another option with a recording is to have students listen back to their discussions. Students at the Center for Inquiry (CFI), an elementary school in the Richland School District, recorded their literature circle discussions, marking each with the date and topics discussed. When the students were done with discussing their books, the literature circle students sat with either the teacher or the collaborative researcher working in the classroom to listen to some of their recorded conversations. In support of this listening, the students applied the learning they had done at the center regarding observation notes by utilizing a two-column note-taking format: one column for observation notes (based on what can be described by one's senses) and one column for interpretation notes (which invite the note-taker to "think about they have observed by making connections, asking questions, and speculating about particular observations" [Mills & Jennings, 2011, p. 590]).

The students used this process of listening and taking notes to look closely at their own literature circle discussions, "carefully peering beyond the surface of their talk to observe and reflect on what made their discussions productive and effective" (Mills & Jennings, 2011, p. 590).

The classroom teacher described the overall student-inquiry as follows:

Taking time to help kids look closely at themselves as readers, writers, speakers, and thinkers supports them to grow in sophisticated ways that can be hard to articulate. By helping them inquire about themselves, they became stakeholders in their own learning. I believe teachers can best help their kids become intentional learners by having them look closely at their literacy learning in order to set and achieve new goals themselves" (Mills & Jennings, 2011, p. 596)

This inquiry stance is consistent with Boatman and Allman's (2018) recognition of Dewey's call for students to be actively engaged in their own learning. It also illustrates the democratic practices highlighted in the study: All voices came to the table to analyze and discuss their collaborative efforts, identify areas that needed improvement, and develop a plan to move forward with this new learning to inform their developing literacy practice.

Celebrating Collaborative Practitioner Research

Boatright and Allman's (2018) case study is a blueprint for how to design a collaborative classroom research study. The use of student-generated data (artifacts) in the form of reflections and essays about the literature students read; observations of the students during their literature circle discussions; observations of the classroom teacher, Allman, by the first author, Boatright; and note-taking by both authors is consistent with expectations for multiple data sources (triangulation) in qualitative research

(Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Shagoury & Power, 2012). I also commend the description of the "constant comparative method based on grounded theory for analyzing the data" (Boatright and Allman, 2018, p. 3). Practitioner research is often criticized for lacking methodological rigor. The details about how Boatright and Allman conducted this research enhance the importance of their findings. The methodology discussion also reinforces the value of practitioner research:

Practitioner researchers are intentional in their work of collecting data, using the data to make decisions about practice and their students' learning and sharing their results. The intent to be a practitioner researcher raises the good teacher to a new level: data collection becomes systematized, reflection is built into practice, findings are analyzed, and discoveries are disseminated. (Campbell, 2013, p. 2)

My hope is that this study will inspire more collaborations of teacher educators and K–12 teachers in support of practitioner research.

One of the most important tasks for the research community is to work with practitioners to develop codified representations of the practical pedagogical wisdom of able teachers . . . Practitioner research can illuminate what teachers know and help to create a history or practice (Shulman, 1987, pp. 11-12).

Recently, I met with a teacher candidate in our Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program. After a long day of student teaching, she dropped by my office before heading to her three-hour graduate course. With a heavy sigh, she asked, "Should I be doing this? I'm worried that I am doing all this work to become a teacher and my efforts in the classroom will not make a difference." This is why we need practitioner research. I was able to share with the teacher candidate what Boatright and Allman (2018) discovered about the importance of the work literature teachers do: We can create democratic classroom communities where students have choice and voice, where they engage in conversations that support their critical reading skills, where they "[storm] through the door demanding answers for questions" about the text (p. 5), and in the process rediscover their "fervor for reading" (p. 4). We can make it possible for a student who has experienced a death in her family to find wisdom, poetry, and perhaps even comfort in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (p. 6). We can create the conditions for students to discover that literature allows us "to try out other lives and connect with other humans through the exercise of imagination and empathy (Gillespie, 1994, p. 21). We need imaginative and empathetic citizens for our democratic society to thrive, so the work we do as teachers of literature matters now more than ever.

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