

# Talking About Talk: Reclaiming the Value and Power of Literature Circles

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Encouraging teachers and students to reflect on their discussions about books can deepen the power of this popular instructional approach.

**O**nastasia, a third grader, understands the power of believing worlds into being through literacy when she says, "Some people say that reading is believing." Ellery, a third grader, understands the role of imagination in transacting with texts when he says, "Without imagination, a book is only ink spots on paper." We do, too.

In fact, 15 years ago we created the school culture now called the Center for Inquiry (CFI) by reading professional literature, reflecting on our own teaching practices, and imagining what might be possible for teachers, students, and university partners. Together, faculty from the University of South Carolina joined with teachers and administrators from Richland School District Two to create a small school partnership with a shared philosophy grounded in the principles of inquiry and democracy in an ethnically diverse community.

As university partners, we collaborated with teachers, administrators, and families at the CFI for five years to gather data about the nature of inquiry-based learning. We found that inquiry was central to the curriculum, but it also pervaded classroom life in ways that were more powerful than we anticipated, creating what we called a *culture of inquiry* (Mills & Donnelly, 2001). In this article, we show how reflection and reflexivity, central features of inquiry, helped two teachers and their students significantly improve the quality of their literature circle conversations.

Although we focus on the practical implications of engaging children in reflective conversations to improve literature circles, it is important to note the universal value of reflective conversations about teaching and learning (Johnston, 2004). We have learned that teachers who create invitations for children to identify, reflect on, interrogate, and resolve dilemmas they face in their daily classroom lives enhance academic growth and build strong classroom communities.

Many educators equate inquiry with science rather than with literature circles (Crawford, Kelly, & Brown, 2000). However, as evident at the CFI and elsewhere, a culture of inquiry is fostered across the content areas, in the talk of teachers and students who engaged in "grand conversations" (Peterson & Eeds, 1990; Wells, 1999) and in both "wondering" and "information-seeking" forms of dialogue (Lindfors, 1999; Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996; Whitin & Whitin, 1997). At the CFI, this kind of dialogue, what Wells (1999) calls *dialogic inquiry*, has supported both academic and social learning as students and teachers negotiate, share ideas, collaborate, and pose and solve problems together (Jennings & Mills, 2009; Kelly & Crawford, 1997; Lemke, 1990; Lindfors, 1999).

Our work has illuminated critical features of inquiry at the CFI that foster academic growth within strong, productive, democratic learning communities (Jennings, 2002; Jennings & Green, 1999; Jennings & Mills, 2009; Jennings, O'Keefe, & Shamlin, 1999; Mills & Donnelly, 2001; Mills, O'Keefe, & Jennings, 2004; Mills, O'Keefe, & Whitin, 1996). Over a period of five years, we captured and documented the processes, practices, and curricular structures that were central to inquiry-based learning across all CFI classrooms. We coded the data and found six

interacting practices of inquiry: (1) Dynamic and Dialogic (Personal and Interpersonal); (2) Multidisciplinary Perspectives; (3) Attentive, Probing, and Thoughtful; (4) Relational and Compassionate; (5) Agentive and Socially Responsible; and (6) Reflection and Reflexivity (Jennings & Mills, 2009).

At the CFI, teachers and students constructed a discourse of inquiry that was *dynamic and dialogic* throughout each day as students shared and built on their personal experiences, understandings, strategies, and questions. They valued and drew on *multidisciplinary perspectives* throughout their inquiries as they learned to view knowledge and the world as readers, writers, mathematicians, scientists, and social scientists.

Their discourse of inquiry was *attentive, probing, and thoughtful* as they carefully observed, interpreted, and sought deeper understandings of literature, the world, and their own communities. Students were asked to critically observe their world to build academic knowledge, and they were expected to observe and support each other as learners. They learned to pay attention to and contribute to their own learning community, marking this discourse of inquiry as *relational and compassionate*.

The students were *agentive and socially responsible* and played a central role in creating and negotiating rules, rituals, structures, and boundaries for living and working together. Students frequently took initiative to negotiate the curriculum, relationships, or social norms. Finally, and most important, *reflection and reflexivity* were central practices that brought everything together in this discourse of inquiry.

We found that significant growth and change occurred as students reflected on their own learning and actions. When learners studied themselves, their own work, and that of their classmates, they deepened their understanding of the content and processes under exploration. By *reflexively* studying themselves, students got in touch with the process and made wise, intentional decisions that led to their growth and change, individually and collectively.

#### PAUSE AND PONDER

- What do effective literature circles look, sound, and feel like?
- How can you involve students in classroom decision making to increase their investment and motivation as readers and community members?
- What scaffolding do you offer in literature circles? How could you improve the quality of your scaffolds?

## Inquiry Into Literature Circles

While *reflection* and *reflexivity* work in concert with the dimensions of inquiry mentioned earlier, we illuminate their roles in helping two accomplished teachers and their students develop more satisfying and productive literature circles. Both teachers put literature circles at the heart of their literacy curricula. They believe literature circles can bring the reading curriculum to life in powerful ways when implemented as intended. Literature circles should reflect how passion-

ate, accomplished readers talk about books in book clubs or literature guilds outside of school (Harvey & Daniels, 2009; Nichols, 2006; Rosenblatt, 1995).

However, literature circles are fragile curricular structures that can easily lose their impact when students are not invested or when habits and routines distract students from engaging in genuine, thoughtful conversations about books. In an effort to reclaim the power and potential of literature circles, teachers Tim and Julie devised opportunities for students to inquire by first observing and then engaging in reflective conversations about effective and ineffective literature circles. Then they used these reflective engagements to promote reflexivity.

Students were asked to reflect, to analyze their talk, thinking, and behavior, and then to make intentional changes or improvements as learners. In other words, students reflected (looked back) and then became reflexive (studied themselves to outgrow themselves). They moved from reflecting on "what is" and envisioned "what might be" to make positive changes in their literature circle talk.

In his third-grade classroom, Tim O'Keefe and his students chose to watch videos of literature circles by Daniels (2001) to examine the interaction patterns in exemplary book club conversations. After reflecting on the professional videotape in relation to their own literature circle conversations, Tim and his students envisioned new possibilities and strategies to use as a community of readers. The fifth graders in Julie Waugh's class actually studied themselves by listening to and analyzing audiotapes of their own literature circle conversations. Both engagements used

reflective dialogue to promote reflexivity (i.e., they learned to study themselves to outgrow themselves individually and collectively).

In the sections that follow, we use italics to clarify the inquiry processes and practices such as making connections, posing questions, observing, interpreting, critiquing, collaborating, shifting perspectives, reflecting, and so forth as we interpret the classroom discourse.

## Students Revise Literature Circles by Watching Professional Videos

Just as classroom teachers at CFI read professional literature and watch professionally published videos to imagine new possibilities for their own teaching, we have learned that it is important to invite students into the process alongside us. We strive to create curricula democratically by giving students voice and choice. We believe it is critical that they have a clear sense of our vision of the purposes and processes that underpin common curricular structures such as reading and writing workshop.

This happens in many ways. Sometimes a teacher will bring the class or a group of students to witness firsthand the ways another class implements a structure such as writing workshop or how the class conducts morning meetings. Other times, students will make suggestions about how to rethink a curricular structure based on their prior experiences with former teachers. Further, teachers and students find inspiration during a whole-school gathering where a class presents how it learns as well as what it has been learning. We also believe students can learn from the demonstrations of teachers or leaders in the field, just as teachers do.

Tim and his third-grade students had been engaging in literature circle conversations since the beginning of the year. There were times when the

conversations were remarkable, when Tim and the students left their circles with a greater understanding of the text and one another. When entering Tim's classroom, it was not uncommon to find students talking their way into understanding. Typically a soft, focused hum of purposeful talk permeated his community. One day in October, Tim noticed a shift in the students' investment during literature conversations. The passion, commitment, and construction of deep questions and connections that usually surrounded the book talks began to wane.

At CFI, teachers "loop" with their students—meaning they teach the same group for two years in a row. Looping offers opportunities for teachers to scaffold learning (as demonstrated in the dialogue exchange that follows). Tim and his second-grade students had constructed a reading log/literature response template together. This was intended to help students think deeply about the reading selection so that they would be poised to make thoughtful contributions to the conversation. The literature response logs seemed to lift the conversations initially. However, Tim noticed that as third-grade students, they had begun reading their written responses in a round-robin fashion instead of using them as inspiration for grand conversations (Peterson & Eeds, 1990).

Rather than give up on the students or on literature circles, Tim and Heidi, collaborative researcher and first author, devised a plan to help his students revisit the purposes and processes of literature conversations and envision new possibilities for this critical literacy structure. To do so, they accessed Daniels's (2001) video, *Looking Into Literature Circles*. Tim and his students engaged in this reflective experience together. They watched the video, took notes, and reflected on what they noticed and documented ideas about how they might take new actions to revise their literature circle conversations.

Tim: It's Monday, October 3rd, and we have just finished watching the Harvey Daniels tape on literature discussions. One of the things that struck me was that when the kids were sharing, they weren't reading from their papers as far as I could tell. Now, you could tell that they had prepared. But they were just sharing stuff from the heart. And I think that made it seem like more of a real discussion.

Lauren: I think that we, um, could like talk about what conflict and great writing that they



have (the class had been focusing on conflict and author's craft in writing workshop) to make our, all the circles better.

Katie: If someone asks a question, I think you should answer it. And I think it is kind of like a web, like if something connects to something it is like a web, and if you keep building onto it will get bigger and bigger. And...it will be like a dinner topic because it is like a big web.

Zach: Well, I uh, was kind of connecting to Katie. If you, um, you should build onto what other people say because it is like building a house, if you just leave it and do something else, it is never going to get done. So, keep on adding on until it is done.

Cody: I think you should tell your favorite parts, and the discussion leader can start by asking a divergent question to get the literature discussion started and, um, I don't think, I think we should share from our hearts and lose the tally marks.

Tim: You think we should lose the tally marks?

In an effort to ensure *equity* in the *community* and conversation, Tim asked a group member to document tally marks next to each speaker's name to promote balance in the discussion. He did so because some students dominated the conversations, and he wanted them to self-monitor so that all voices would be heard and valued. Clearly, the students were urging him to rethink this turn-taking strategy. Katie used a web as a metaphor for ways she thought they might weave the conversation together, and then Zach used building a house to show the importance of *building on* one another's contributions. Jordan embraced the vision they were *constructing* and continued weaving the connecting thread.

Jordan: I think if someone asks a big question or someone comes up with an idea or just says something that you should just build off of it.

Onastasia: I think you should not just read off of your paper or read off books, but you should read off your mind or read off your heart.

Tim: I am agreeing with a couple of kids who I think mentioned sort of a dinner table discussion (in this and in previous conversations). I can't remember who it was that said that. But I could really tell looking at this tape that that was what these kids had. The idea is just to have a talk with friends. It doesn't have to be formal. It doesn't have to be like fist and fingers or some kind of tally mark thing. Maybe that was my mistake for starting that this year and I am perfectly willing to drop it. I think someone, Cody, said let's get rid of the tally marks because maybe the tally marks make it a little too artificial.

Tim was taken by the insights and ideas being generated.

It was his initial vision to use the video to get students back in touch with holding powerful conversations around compelling books. The video inspired them to *reflect* on their talk and their conversational turn-taking patterns. The students were not suggesting that their class adopt the precise strategies they witnessed in the video. Instead, Tim and the students *were co-constructing a new vision* for literature circle talk. They were *making observations* from Harvey Daniels and the classrooms that were featured in the video, *interpreting* them, and making them their own based on their own needs and interests as a community of readers.

Tim: I know. And our goal is to have a great conversation and have everyone involved. Your goal shouldn't be to have the most tally marks. So anyway, what really amazed me about this tape is how these young kids, big kids, and even grownups are into talking about books, and that is our goal. Our goal is through these conversations for you to understand more, share ideas, become excited about the reading. I know, I don't think anybody has told me they don't like this book.



Every person so far, as far as I could tell by reading your reading logs and having these conversations, I can tell you like the book. So, I think watching that videotape and having this conversation is going to help us. Go ahead, Lauren.

Lauren: Um, well, I think you should tell like how you felt about that part like if, um, if you were sad by that part and stuff.

Tim: So sharing your emotions I think would be a great idea. So, you call someone.

Katie: Um.... Onastasia.

Onastasia: I think that we should talk about text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world because, uh, then you could like connect to stuff and that would make your conversation go on and on and on.

Tim: And that is sort of more natural, too. Isn't it? When you are just making connections to things, other stories, other books by this author, those kinds of things. Those things are sort of natural for us to do. And you could write that down, too.

Onastasia: I think that we should have more talking into the silence because then you could talk about anything at almost any time and, um, then friends couldn't like and it wouldn't matter like fists or fingers.

Fist and Fingers was another strategy Tim employed to promote equity in the conversation. Basically, the person with the fewest number of fingers up is called on to talk, and then that person calls on the next person with the fewest fingers up. Although the strategy fostered equity of voices in the conversation, by its nature it made it difficult to build a genuine conversation in which students are *connecting to and building on* one another's thinking.

Speaking Into the Silence, which is respectful yet natural turn-taking, was another conversational strategy they valued, and Onastasia suggested it as a better fit for literature circle conversations. When Speaking Into the Silence, students learn to watch and listen for natural openings in conversations by "reading" eye contact, gestures, and intonation. They wait for a quiet moment before offering a new comment or question. If two people speak at once, one retreats, knowing he or she will speak next. Speaking

Into the Silence is a strategy that takes practice. The practice promotes student-directed turn-taking and fosters the process of making connections across group members.

Tim: OK.

Onastasia: And people wouldn't call on like their favorite people. No calling, just speak out. It is more beautiful.

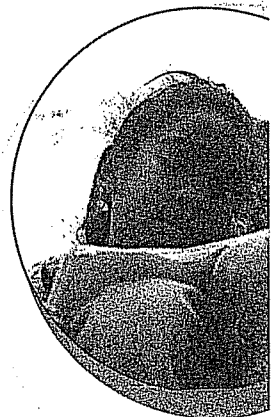
Clirae: I think that if somebody just asks the question and you should just keep telling something related to what they said and keep building up a conversation.

Building up a conversation—that was Tim's vision when he devised this experience. He wanted the students to look closely and listen carefully as they watched a video of children and adults from Chicago engage in thoughtful, collaborative literature discussions. He wanted the video to inspire them to develop a shared vision about how they might improve their own literature circles. The students discussed the strategies they appreciated on the video and then *reflected* back on their own literature circle conversations to make concrete improvements. In so doing, they *reflexively* outgrew themselves individually and collectively. They explored problems they had encountered in careful yet critical ways.

Tim served as participant and mentor throughout the process. Tim agreed to let go of the tally mark requirement to document participation, showing his students how he too was growing and changing through this reflective conversation. Tim took the students' suggestion that literature circle conversations should look, sound, and feel like dinner table talk. From that point, they strove for their conversations to reflect what they described as dinner table or kitchen table talk. Tim launched literature circle conversations with his current group of students using "kitchen table talk" as his vision, and he gave credit to the students featured in this article for the inspiration.

## Students Inquire Into Their Own Literature Circle Discussions

Julie contacted Louise, collaborative researcher



and second author, to develop an inquiry into her fourth-grade classroom's own literature circle discussions. The resulting project built on practices of inquiry familiar to Julie's students, and provided them with an opportunity to see how they could use these practices to reflect on and transform their own actions and interactions as readers, learners, and classmates.

In January, when reading historical fiction books related to the U.S. Civil War, Louise and Julie taught the students to audiotape each literature circle discussion, marking each tape with the date and topics discussed. After several weeks, as groups reached their books' conclusions, they sat with either Julie or Louise to listen to some of the recorded discussions, take observation and interpretation notes as they listened, and then discuss what they noticed. Observation notes focus on what can be described through one's senses, whereas interpretation notes invite the writer to think about what she or he has observed by making connections, asking questions, and speculating about particular observations.

The students had used observation and interpretation notes across the curriculum for years and were accustomed to drawing a line down the page to form two columns for observing and interpreting (Yeager, Pattenau, Fránquiz, & Jennings, 1999). For this set of notes, students were guided by an inquiry stance (Jennings, 2002; Jennings et al., 1999; Mills & Donnelly, 2001; Short et al., 1996) that focused their attention on their group's actions and interactions. The students inquired into 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.

One group consisted of Jonathan, Hutton, Taylor, Sarah, and Faith. They randomly selected a few tapes and while listening, they took notes. At the end of a taped segment, Julie suggested that the

students take a few minutes to write additional observation notes with corresponding interpretations.

One tape captured a conversation in which the group was talking about several topics, none of which related to the book. At the end of this taped segment, Faith asked her group members to return to discussion of the book by saying, "P.S., let's get back to the book!" After wrapping up their interpretative notes, they had the following discussion:

Julie: OK, so what observations and interpretations did you make for this one?

Jonathan: OK. I wrote, we're not talking about the story.

Julie: M-hmm. Did anyone else notice that?

Faith: [laughing] Yes!

Julie: [laughing] And I actually wrote that this happened for most of that tape, which was about four minutes. What other observations and interpretations? Sarah is writing furiously—we need to give her a second.

Sarah: I put that I like how, um, how Faith goes "Guys, guys, guys, you know what?" And she was like...

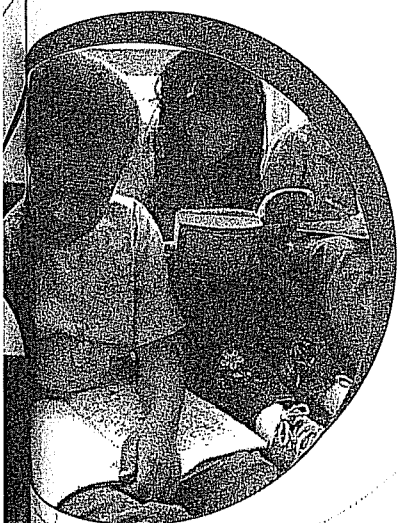
Faith: Like I'm getting—[laughs]

Hutton: She goes, "P.S., let's get back to the book."

[Group laughs]

Julie: My interpretation of that is that she was really sticking her neck out there, but then too she made it fun: "P.S., let's get back to the book." So it wasn't, um, it wasn't [said in a bossy tone of voice], "Come on, you guys, we've got to get back." But it was fun sort of acknowledging, and everybody was sort of involved in the conversation that was off track, weren't they? And so it was sort of a flags up—hey, yoo-hoo, let's get back to the book.

Clearly, everybody in the group noted that they were "off track" and, knowing it was atypical for their group, they discussed it with good humor. Their dialogue was *attentive*, *probing*, and *thoughtful*, and assisted by the use of recording observation and interpretation notes. For example, Sarah's observational notes recorded a lot of actual dialogue, and her accompanying interpretation notes were marked





in large letters: "WAYYY...OFF THE SUBJECT!" She also captured Faith's remark, "P.S., let's get back to the book."

Julie and her students then *skillfully* referred to their notes to develop their interpretation of the literature circle dynamic. Sarah, Faith, and Hutton built on one another's talk and laughter to reconstruct Faith's role in gently bringing the group back to the book. Julie *extended* the observations made by Sarah and Hutton about Faith's choice words to *probe* further, pointing to the importance of Faith's tone and demeanor in effectively bringing the group back to book talk. Through this conversation, they acknowledged that groups will veer off track and that it is acceptable to do so, but that it is also important to find ways to get back on track. Students can find ways, like Faith did, to take that responsibility without placing oneself above the others in the group.

Through their inquiry into their own group dynamic, these students *collaborated to observe* and inquire into the dynamics of *building and maintaining community* in their literature circle. They were able to consider what it looks and sounds like not only to veer off track, but also for a member of the group to step into a leadership role to redirect the community. The inquiry into the dynamic reflected the recorded literature circle discussion in the *thoughtful* and *compassionate* nature of this *self-reflection*.

## Instructional Implications: Strategies That Make a Difference

Although all teachers feel a sense of responsibility to both standards and to their students, we have found that teachers who have a strong sense of agency make time for the things they value. Tim and Julie valued their students' thinking and believed in their students' capacity to grow and change through reflective conversations. In Julie's words,

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 become stakeholders in their own learning. I believe teachers can best help kids become intentional learners by having them look closely at their own literacy learning in order to set and achieve new goals themselves.

We identify in the following list concrete strategies that teachers at CFI use to help students inquire into literature circles. This powerful yet fragile curricular structure requires careful scaffolding before, during, and after the literature conversations. Scaffolding is authentic and lasting when implemented via an inquiry stance.

- Take a few moments before starting literature circles each day to ask students what they should expect their literature circles to look, sound, and feel like.
- Take your students to visit other classrooms that have successful literature circles in place. Have students observe and take notes. After returning to your classroom, ask your students to discuss what worked well and identify strategies they want to try during their own literature conversations.
- Ask your students to generate a list of qualities of effective literature conversations from their experiences with their former teachers.
- Invite students to help you create a self-evaluation template identifying qualities of effective literature circles. Have students complete this form at the end of each conversation.
- Watch professionally produced or teacher-made videos as a class to glean insights and strategies that could be used to make concrete improvements in students' own talk, investment, and turn-taking moves.
- Involve your students in the creation of literature response journals or templates to help them reflect on the readings in preparation for each conversation.
- Teach stems for responding to texts. These may include "I noticed...", "I wondered...", "I appreciated...", "I felt...", "I made a connection...", "I learned...", and "I was surprised by..."
- Teach turn-taking strategies to your students. Once you have a repertoire of possibilities (e.g., Fist and Fingers, Speaking Into the Silence), suggest that each group make a decision about the particular strategy it wants to use each day before launching a conversation.
- Chart students' good ideas and use them! The more we show students that we respect and embrace their thinking, the more we help them

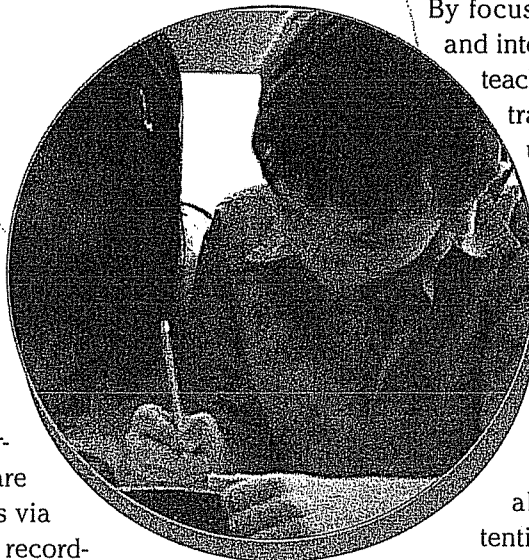
create strong identities as readers and community members with a sense of agency.

- Have students tape record their literature circle conversations. You can listen to them on the way home from school to get a feel for the students' investment in each group. Mention a comment or question from each group before the next conversation to show students you are a participant in their groups via technology. Initially, the tape recorders remind students to stay on track. Once they get comfortable with tape recorders, you can have students listen to and analyze their own talk to document what they did well and what they should do to make improvements as individuals and as a group.

These inquiries engaged students in looking beyond the surface of their discussions to consider how to make them even more productive, intellectually rigorous, and fair. The guidance that Tim and Julie offered across these *reflective dialogue* sessions was critical in helping their students notice the complexity of their talk and the role of talk in literacy, learning, and community building. These teachers played an active role in examining literature circles with the students by engaging in dialogue with them, offering their own observations and interpretations as participants in the conversations.

Although Tim and Julie often extended or rephrased the students' observations in ways that helped students to focus on how their observations could be interpreted, they did so much more. In other words, the teachers talked with their students reader-to-reader. They offered their insights and ideas as readers and participants in literature conversations. They offered their insights as teachers not to impose their ways on their students, but to share an experienced perspective that might help them make wise individual and collective decisions.

These inquiries helped the students to burrow into the "why" of things and take action on "what" they learn (Freire, 1970, 1973) and "how" they learn.



By focusing on their own actions and interactions, the students and teachers were able to *reflexively* transform the nature of their understanding of the reading process as well as the content and form of literature circle discussions. Furthermore, listening to themselves talk about the reading process and literature circles propelled students to talk deeply and with meaning about the power and potential of literature as a way of knowing (Rosenblatt, 1995).

Although numerous processes and practices of inquiry were woven into these conversations, their *reflective* nature was most compelling. Our inquiry led us to deepen our appreciation of the power and potential of reflective engagements. Of the nearly 400 classroom events that were coded across the two data sets, *reflection* was coded more than 300 times. These conversations helped us see what is possible when teachers provide opportunities for students to come together to reflect on literacy practices and take new actions.

## Learning That Lasts: Lifting Conversations Through Conversation

We do not want to leave the impression that the remaining literature circles were always smooth and brilliant. Some students had a hard time letting go of reading their literature response entries when contributing to the conversation, other students struggled not to dominate the talk, and still others continued to get off-topic, as all people can do when engaged in small-group work.

However, the impact of these reflective conversations was lasting. Students took with them literacy and inquiry practices that they could use to reflect on their interactions in other settings. They learned to take both reflective and reflexive stances and to pay attention to talk and their own engagement in it. The dialogue that emerged from Tim and Julie's invitations supported students as more thoughtful and



reflective readers—and more thoughtful and reflective community members. They imagined new possibilities for themselves and their futures.

## Note

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## MORE TO EXPLORE

### ReadWriteThink.org Lesson Plans

- "Give Them a Hand: Promoting Positive Interaction in Literature Circles" by Lane Clarke
- "No Teachers Allowed: Student-Led Book Clubs Using QAR" by Emily Manning
- "Thoughtful Threads: Sparking Rich Online Discussions" by Lotta C. Larson

### IRA Books

- *Children's Literature in the Reading Program: An Invitation to Read* (3rd ed.) edited by Deborah A. Wooten and Bernice E. Cullinan
- *Getting Beyond "I Like the Book": Creating Space for Critical Literacy in K-6 Classrooms* by Vivian Vasquez

### IRA Journal Articles

- "Help! What Is Wrong With These Literature Circles and How Can We Fix Them?" by Lane W. Clarke and Jennifer Holwadel. *The Reading Teacher*, September 2007
- "Textmasters: Bringing Literature Circles to Textbook Reading Across the Curriculum" by Lori G. Wilfong. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, October 2009