Ryan Orwig’s task was to go into an existing classroom at an urban school with significantly low reading scores and conduct book clubs with the students once a week. An experienced teacher and graduate student, Ryan was a graduate research assistant in a partnership of teachers, administrators, and university faculty working together to create a dynamic learning community aimed at increasing students’ literacy learning and motivation to read and write. Ryan wrote:

Perhaps I was naive, but when I started teaching the book club at an urban, low-income school I knew there would be many challenges. However, the one that struck me immediately was the fact that, even when they did read, these students had no experience discussing material and connecting it to their lives. As they explained it, they simply read what was assigned (sometimes) and answered the questions (if they had time). Reading was something that was forced upon them, and it had no connection to their lives whatsoever.

Approaching the task with some degree of trepidation, Ryan soon found that engaging the students in meaningful dialogue about books that mattered to them revealed very different kinds of students from the disconnected ones he had first observed. Books became dog-eared as readers returned to them again and again to support an argument. Students engaged in heated dialogue about big ideas like justice and the nature of guilt and innocence in the court system—a topic encountered in the text but swiftly connected to and debated in the arena of their own lives. Ryan reports that one student literally woke up, abandoning her usual habit of snoozing during class to engage in the literature study group. They began, as the poet W. H. Auden described it, giving “passionate attention” (Peterson & Eeds, 1990, p. 12) to a text—and such attention is a powerful force to becoming fully and actively literate.

Literature study and the middle school learner

Early adolescence can be a difficult and tumultuous time for students. Both boys and girls have serious concerns about being accepted by their peers, about their physical development, their attractiveness to the opposite sex, their success in athletics, and their academic performance in the classroom (Atwell, 1998). As the poet John Ciardi put it, “You don’t have to suffer to be a poet; adolescence is enough suffering for anyone” (quoted in Atwell, p. 51). Such are the middle grades years.

This article reflects the following This We Believe characteristics: Meaningful Learning — Challenging Curriculum — Multiple Learning Approaches
For some middle grades teachers and administrators, the young adolescent is seen in terms of predictable challenges to authority. Hence, the emphasis is on running a tight ship. Middle grades schools are highly organized institutions with many rules to be observed, punishments for every imaginable infraction, and lots of homework. “Keep them busy, really busy, all of the time,” it is often argued, “and you will have fewer discipline problems.” This is easier said than done with an age group whose moods swing from one extreme to another almost hourly— I hate math; I love Mr. So and So; I’ll never speak to you again—and whose passions are seemingly boundless.

With such emphasis on controlling students, enforcing rules, and dealing with the ever-changing emotions and passions of adolescents, a middle grades school can easily become, as Atwell (1998) puts it, a stifling place or “holding tank.” Teachers and administrators alike sometimes forget that for the individual child, middle school is rarely about math or science or social studies. School, as John Goodland (1984) illustrated in his classic book, A Place Called School, is about friendships, relationships, and the social needs of young people. Any middle grades program that ignores these needs will face adolescents in a continuous struggle with authority and, too often, on the verge of dropping out of school completely.

Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century stressed that many adolescents feel lost, separated from the major institutions of society, and emotionally adrift in terms of their present or future goals (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989). The authors noted, however, that middle school programs can be a viable force for reengaging young people and providing them with a purpose. Engaging in rich and meaningful ways with books that have real appeal for young adolescents is one way to help capture the enthusiasm that these same students brought to their schools only a few short years before and, in so doing, to maximize the power of their learning.

What’s in a name?

Book clubs. Literature circles. Literature study groups. The terms are bandied about sometimes interchangeably and sometimes with implied distinctions about how and for what purposes they are conducted. What these groups have in common, though, is the gathering of a small group of peer readers to share insights about a common text. Literature study groups, in general, are characterized by (a) flexible grouping (usually determined by a reader’s choice of a given book at a given time); (b) participant-centered dialogue (participant insights determine the direction of the dialogue; the teacher takes on the role of facilitator and expert participant rather than director of discussion); and (c) embeddedness in a strong, meaning-centered curriculum in which learners read and write copiously for real purposes. Examples of such curriculum frameworks may be found in the work of Raphael, Pardo, and Highfield (2002) and Peterson and Eeds (1990), among others, and are easily adaptable across grade levels and subject areas (Dale, 1999; Noll, 1994; Roberts, 1998; Wilkinson & Kido, 1997). Indeed, some of the strongest foundational work in this pedagogy was conducted at the middle level (Eeds & Wells, 1989; Peterson & Eeds, 1990; Smith, 1990, 1995, 1997).

What makes such engagements particularly well-suited to middle grades learners is that literature studies are highly effective in developing reading ability, knowledge about literature, and critical and analytic thinking (Faust, Cockrill, Hancock, & Isserstedt, 2005). Moreover, they accomplish these things in such a way that students are aware of their own growth. Literature studies provide space for students’ voices to be heard, valuing their meanings, concerns, and insights. As Peterson and Eeds (2007) pointed out, “Story is an exploration and illumination of life” (p. 18). Students in these studies are learning about literacy and becoming proficient at it; and they are learning about life—their own lives, lived among others. It is learning that matters significantly.

You don’t have to suffer to be a poet; adolescence is enough suffering for anyone.

—John Ciardi
Learning “with legs”: Literature study as generative learning

Literature study, done well, fosters generative learning. Wittrock (1992) described generative learning as a process that involves actively building connections between what we know and understand to new ideas and experiences to make meaning and suggest further action. In a practical sense, we see generative learning as learning that is so effective and engaging, it causes us to want to know more. Generative learning experiences propel us to deeper understandings and applications for further learning. The child who participates in a productive literature study session leaves that session a different reader—more aware of the possibilities for interpreting texts, more in tune with the significance that texts may have to his own life, and more confident in his or her ability to make meaning from texts. Generative learning experiences connect to and build upon the learner’s life experiences and those things that are of value to her. They provide space for interpretation and personal ownership. Perhaps most important, generative learning experiences intrigue, bringing the learner to wonder and to want to know and experience more and more. Generative learning has impetus and energy to propel the learner to new experiences, new explorations. It is, in short, “learning with legs.”

Beliefs about teaching and learning

Every choice a teacher makes in a classroom is grounded in and reflective of beliefs about teaching and learning. More important, the choices teachers make about how to teach communicate to the learner the very nature of what is to be learned. The choice to engage learners with literature study, like all instructional choices a teacher makes, stems from and reflects certain beliefs about literacy and learning. We posit several of these beliefs here as a framework for discussing what a teacher’s choice to implement literature study groups says about readers and the act of reading.

1. Reading is an active, interpretive engagement in which the reader brings meaning to and takes meaning from the text. In such a transactional view of reading (Rosenblatt, 1978), the meaning does not lie static in the text waiting for us to retrieve it. Rather, meaning is constructed in a transaction between the reader and the text, so both are equally important in determining it. The reader brings meaning to the text—background knowledge (about the text and about life), experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and understandings—and takes meaning from the text. Each transaction between a certain reader and a text results, then, in a unique reading of that text.

2. Reading is a vigorous meaning-making act, and the recognition of this fact leads us to hold a deep respect for readers. Too often, we teach in ways that relegate learners to passive recipients of others’ ideas. We tell them what to read, we ask them questions that matter to us (or to the textbook authors or test makers), and we close the book after the reading to move to a skill lesson that we have decided connects in some way to the story they have read. Such engagements portray the reader as one who is dependent on others to determine what matters and portray the act of reading as something that is removed from the reader’s life. The goal of reading, then, is to get through it and get it right according to someone else’s idea of what is right, rather than living through and within a text, interpreting, connecting with, and wondering about it.

3. Dialogue is powerful pedagogy (Peterson & Eeds, 2007). As Ralph Peterson (1986) pointed out, dialogue goes beyond discussion. It is a more passionate, often unruly, and amazingly powerful form of communication. Dialogue is the unicorn to discussion’s horse, as mercurial as it is serviceable, and capable of introducing us to worlds beyond those we had anticipated entering. While discussion is directed talk, usually focused on a specific goal or instructional point to be made and moderated by one person, dialogue calls for full-contact engagement by all participants, with respectful attention to listening and understanding multiple viewpoints. It is through dialogue that the social transactions occur that bring us to understand ourselves, and others, more deeply. It is also through dialogue that learners develop rich and applicable insights into literature and the concomitant act of authoring, insights that accompany readers to their next encounter with a book or with the blank page. Dialogue enriches the quality of that engagement.

Through dialogue with others who have read the same book, readers often begin to see new and intriguing aspects of the text. They experience new perspectives beyond what their experiences showed them the first time through. Readers naturally begin to talk about literary elements like plot and characterization and
symbol and mood, because they are the fiber from which the story cloth is woven. When readers talk about a story, they talk about story elements. Readers often come to understand these elements within the context of a story well before they can actually name them. When they do name those elements in this meaningful, purposeful context, the terms really make sense. Thus, readers understand and can use this new knowledge to gain deeper insights when they read (and write) again.

4. Story matters (Junker, 1998). The time we take to read and talk about literature, and the energy we spend “entertaining a text” (Smith, 1990), is well worth it. It is not an add-on to the curriculum or an instructional filler. Instead, it is central to a curriculum that seeks to go beyond the gathering of facts and bits to foster meaningful connections and authentic applications. Indeed, what do we teach that does not have the ultimate purpose of helping our students understand themselves and the world around them? Isn’t the central purpose of education to help learners to ponder who they should be in the world and how they should help that world? Talking together about richly crafted stories helps readers develop perspective, empathy, and compassion. “Bumping up against ideologies” (Taylor, as cited in Evans, 1996) in texts reflecting multiple perspectives and diverse experiences leads learners to interrogate their own experiences and beliefs, resulting in development of strong, cogent, and articulated belief systems. Exploring challenges and possibilities in literary worlds may foster hope and a sense of empowerment. In stories, we find ourselves, including our possible selves, reflected in like characters with like experiences and standing out in stark relief against others. Good stories bring us to ask, “What might be?”—an important question for all of us to grapple with, but one that gets to the very core of the young adolescent’s journey.

**Practical considerations for conducting literature study**

**Selecting books**

Ideally, the foremost consideration in selecting books for literature study is to find books that offer, as Bonnie Raitt famously sang, “something to talk about” (Eikhard, 1985). Book selections for middle grades learners should be about things that matter to young adolescents who are discovering themselves and making their marks upon the world. Such selections should offer layers of meaning, rich in symbol and metaphor, that leave sufficient room for personal interpretation. They should build on powerful, generative themes that simultaneously relate to readers’ lives and illuminate broader truths beyond their own personal experiences. Generative themes may be defined as central, often universal, truths that are woven throughout a story. Examples of generative themes include, but are certainly not limited to, transience and resilience (life changes, people adapt, love and hope endure), interconnectedness (what we do affects others and the world we live in), perspective (mine is not the only way of being in the world), and grace (all people make mistakes and are given the chance go on and do better).

Great stories for literature study should feature characters “in whom children can see themselves—as they are—and whose situations and choices allow children to extend their view of possibilities—how they might be” (Junker, 1998, p. 192). And they must, especially for the young adolescent, offer something to chew on besides a blatant, didactic message that leaves the reader no room to contemplate or argue but, rather, only to accept or reject someone else’s stance (Junker, 1998, 1999).

Literature discussion groups can help students gain deeper understanding of the texts they read and make reading more enjoyable.
Particularly well-suited for middle grades students are books that invite readers to take a critical stance on issues and ideas central to their own lives and the society in which they live (Leland & Harste, 2002). Such texts tend to foster passionate and, therefore, deeply engaging dialogue, and they also propel students to explore and apply ideas from the text to change the world around them.

It is also important for teachers to select texts representing a variety of genres. Contemporary realistic fiction is a natural choice for many middle grades readers, inviting them to understand the universality of human experiences and offering, at once, the chance not to be so alone and the chance to become more empathetic and tolerant. Historical fiction, and some biographies, afford the same possibilities, but offer a view of shared human experience that spans the ages, helping students understand that for generations people have experienced love and hurt and longing and joy, have felt isolated, have made mistakes, have mattered and made a difference in the world, and that each of us is part of this continuing experience. Fantasy and science fiction, genres with wide appeal for this age group (and, often, not so wide appeal for their teachers), may offer the richest truths and possibilities for meaningful connections with students’ lives. Well-written fantasy features meticulously crafted worlds that, by removing us from obvious connections to lived experiences, allow us to consider bigger questions of life, such as “What is it that makes us human?” and “What really matters?” Consider, for example, Lois Lowry’s (1993) *The Giver*, Nancy Farmer’s (2002) *The House of the Scorpion*, or Eloise McGraw’s (1996) *The Moorchild*. Such books also allow readers to ponder universal forces, such as good and evil, and the place they occupy in all of us, as in J. K. Rowling’s (1999, 2000, 2001) phenomenally popular Harry Potter series or Madeline L’Engle’s (1962) classic *A Wrinkle in Time* and its trilogy partners. Nonfiction texts for literature study offer intriguing possibilities for exploring information analytically and from a variety of perspectives, but the texts need to be well-chosen to afford room for wondering, as discussed above.

**Selecting groups**

Student choice is central to effective literature studies, as each participant needs the opportunity to work with a text that matters to him or her. The process begins with the introduction of a set of quality books and an invitation to students to choose the ones of greatest interest. With a little negotiation, students can form small groups for study. Groups should consist of four to six members. Having too few members in a group often results in not enough perspectives to feed rich dialogue, while having too many sometimes silences members.

Though readers tend to select books that match their ability levels, ultimately, selection should be driven by interest; readers should be allowed to select books that are beyond their abilities to navigate independently. It is our belief that readers should not be discouraged from tackling any text they find interesting; indeed, assisting a student with text access before the study may have a strong learning benefit in the end. A reader who struggles to get through a text, then experiences it more fully through dialogue, may return to that text and read it again, each time assimilating it more fully, more fluently, and with more enjoyment.

**Preparing for study**

We believe it is important for participants to read the chosen work entirely before coming to the literature study dialogue session. Every book is constructed as a whole, and to discuss it in part is to experience the book much as the mice in Ed Young’s (1992) *Seven Blind Mice* experience an elephant. In this retelling of an ancient Indian tale, the mice’s territory is invaded by a mysterious “something.” Mouse by mouse, they go out to investigate. One, who feels the elephant’s tail, returns to report that the “something” is a rope. Another mouse, who investigates the leg, asserts that the “something” is a pillar, and so on. It is not until the final mouse covers every inch of the elephant that the mice can come to understand what is truly in front of them. A book that is addressed piece by piece is a very different animal from one that is experienced in its entire, carefully connected form.

To get each member to the literature study session fully prepared, it is important to offer both organizational and instructional support. The teaching done here not only maximizes the effectiveness of the literature study but also prepares students to perform more effectively in other aspects of school and life. Teachers should provide each group with a target date for the dialogue session and assist each reader in drawing up a reading plan. A reading plan should take into account the length of the book, a comfortable reading speed, and outside factors such as the student’s overall course load. A simple calendar can facilitate the process, listing dates leading up to the
study with reading goals (number of pages or chapters) noted for each date. With some instruction early in the year, many students will become adept at organizing themselves, while others may need continuing support throughout the year.

Students also need guidance to organize their conceptual understanding of literature. Useful strategies here include teaching students to keep reading logs in which they record their reactions and questions regularly as they read and scheduling stopgap teacher-student discussion sessions to discuss progress and insights. Such sessions are especially helpful for readers who have more difficulty navigating texts on their own. Technological resources like e-mail and online discussion boards are particularly helpful in dealing with the limited time for teacher-student interaction afforded by many middle grades school schedules. Finally, we must mention the use of the marvelously low-tech sticky note as a conceptual organizer. We use them to mark points of interest in a text, such as anything that grabs us or makes us wonder or that we want to be sure to share. A word or phrase jotted onto the sticky note can help a reader remember just what was so interesting about the passage.

Conducting the sessions

The teacher’s role

One central belief guiding literature study practice is that each participant’s interpretations and insights matter. This same respect is afforded to teacher and student. The teacher reads the same book the students read (not an annotation nor a teacher’s version with notes dictating what to think and what to tell students to think) and reads it as a reader—noticeing, wondering, and making personal determinations about what matters. When meeting with students, the teacher then shares those insights and adds respectfully to the dialogue based on those understandings. It is important to note that being an authentic participant does not mean abdicating the role of teacher; rather, the teacher models how to engage in dialogue and offers up expanded possibilities for interpretation.

Supporting literary learning

Literature study groups in the middle grades may be teacher- or student-led. While both configurations have real value, one real benefit of having the teacher lead the group, especially in the beginning of the year, is to support the development of literary insights through the study. Wolfe (2004) notes five critical lenses through which learners may examine a text: (1) generic criticism—taking into account the author’s experiences and intents; (2) formal criticism—examining closely how “textual elements work together to create a unified whole” (p. 24); (3) text-to-text criticism—gaining insight into the text by comparing it to other texts related by genre, author, or theme; (4) transactional criticism—consciously connecting the reader’s life experiences with the text; (5) sociocultural criticism—interrogating the text “in terms of whose perspectives, values, and norms are voiced and whose views are silenced” (p. 24). Certain texts may encourage particular types of analysis. For instance, a text in which readers see their own lives or encounter an idea about which they are passionate may move them toward transactional analysis or sociocultural analysis, while a book with exceptionally strong characterization may foster formal analysis of the author’s use of that element. An expert teacher sharing personal insights and modeling various types of response will greatly increase students’ abilities and propensities to consider varied aspects of and possibilities for engaging with a text. It is important to reiterate that the teacher’s role is not to direct or prescribe talk but to participate as an expert, offering up insights and possibilities that build on and support students’ own significant contributions. Ideally, as students become more and more adept at noticing from a literary perspective, groups will become increasingly supported and sustained by the students. Part of the teacher’s role, then, is to teach students to take over the facilitator role as the year progresses, eventually settling on a mix of both student-facilitated and teacher-facilitated experiences.

The focus question: Taking it deeper

One way of guiding participants to go deeper into analyzing and understanding a text is to design the study session employing a group-determined focus question. This technique works best when one book is discussed for at least two sessions. During the initial session, one participant (usually the teacher, if the session is teacher-led) serves as a metalistener, engaging fully in the dialogue but also noting central comments and trends. At the end of the session, the group members revisit their dialogue with the help of the metalistener and formulate a question to take back to the text for further exploration.
Just as the book shapes the dialogue—a strongly character-driven story, for instance, might engender much talk about characterization—the dialogue shapes the question. Participants might note, in reviewing their progress, that they have made several intriguing points about religious symbolism in the seemingly secular book *The House of the Scorpion* (Farmer, 2002) and, because of this, might determine to go back to the text and explore more fully Farmer’s use of such symbolism. The discussion during the next class session would begin with that topic, providing more focus and taking the students deeper into the elements of the story. It is important that the focus question be taken as a starting point for dialogue in the second session, not as an opportunity for reporting participant “answers” to the question.

**The broader context**

The most effective literature studies do not happen in a vacuum. In classrooms where literature study is implemented effectively, members of the classroom community enthusiastically talk about the stories they are reading. Teachers obviously read and enjoy reading. They talk about what they read. They note aloud interesting aspects of a text, letting their expertise shine and encouraging others to notice as well. Effective teachers in literature study groups are inquiring readers first, and they actively foster environments that encourage their students to engage texts in the same ways. Extensive reading by students is not just encouraged in these classrooms; it is actively facilitated as teachers and other faculty members introduce great books and make them easily available to other readers, and they put structures in place for peers to review and exchange responses to the texts they read (Peterson & Eeds, 2007). Talk about books permeates day-to-day life. Learners (adult and adolescent) read and read and read, without quizzes or reports, making their own choices without the constraints of assigned levels or topics, telling each other about great books, passing them about, lounging about with books, swapping favorites like trading cards, and putting aside books that fail to grab them. These are practical and highly desirable goals.

Writing, too, is of central importance in supporting effective literature study groups, and literature study groups help develop writers more acutely aware of the authoring craft. The writing environment, like the reading environment described above, should be an active community of adolescent and adult writers, marked by extensive opportunities to produce meaningful texts and focused effort to refine texts for authentic purposes.

Teaching reading through literature study groups has an inquiry focus. It stands to reason, therefore, that when a broader curriculum values and fosters an inquiry stance to learning, then wondering, analyzing, and problem-solving become the ways learners approach tasks in any area. Like inquiry-based pedagogy in all subject areas, literature study develops critical thinking and an active, empowered, and interested approach to learning and life.

**One curricular model**

In *Book Club: A Literature-Based Curriculum*, Raphael, Pardo, and Highfield (2002) described a framework for exploring literature in which student-led discussions are the central component upon which all else depends. They separated book clubs into five complementary components that can be arranged in various ways depending on the teacher’s needs. In the first component, *opening community share*, the teacher starts with a brief lesson in which a specific skill or strategy is taught to the whole class and is related to the coming reading and writing. During the second component, *reading*, students take time to read, either independently, with support, or in a group. During the third component, *writing*, students write in their journals or logs. Finally, they move into the fourth component, *groups*. Here, in small groups, they participate in discussions about the book, the length of the conversation depending on the students’ age and experience. All the while, the teacher circulates to moderate, add input, redirect, and help

> **Now, when teachers ask me to write, I just start going and going, like we do in here. Before, I’d just fake it. I didn’t know what to do. Now, it’s easy.**
> —Michael, a student in a literature study group
struggling students. After the first four components are complete, the teacher draws all the groups back into a whole-class discussion that serves as a culminating phase—closing community share. Here, students share insights, struggles, or connections made in the small-group discussions. This is a flexible model for literature study that teachers should alter to fit their classes’ needs.

A place for every learner

The middle grades years, perhaps more than any others, are marked by wild variances in development (especially physical and emotional) and interests. They are also a time of significant academic variances, which take on profound importance as students begin to make strong statements about who they are and who they will be. The instructional and research partners in the study noted a positive impact on literacy learning for the previously low-performing students in those classrooms. Michael, one of those students, noted that, because of his book club experiences, writing began to come more easily for him: “Now, when teachers ask me to write, I just start going and going, like we do in here. Before, I’d just fake it. I didn’t know what to do. Now, it’s easy.” Ryan, his group leader, added, “I think the ideas were always in him. Now, for the first time, he is in a classroom format where he can go and go, like we do in here. Before, I’d just fake it.”

It is that very opportunity that allows literature study to work for students at all levels. Literature study, with its attention to interpretation, voice, and choice, is uniquely suited for meeting the needs of this dynamic age group, allowing each young adolescent student, whether struggling or sailing, to engage meaningfully, appropriately, and effectively in learning.

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References


Extensions

The authors contend that literature study in the middle grades should be based on books that matter to students. Consider forming an inquiry group of students, teachers, and media specialists in your school to identify texts that may matter to students and make plans to acquire those texts if they are not in your school library.
Appendix

Resources for Selecting Books for Middle Grades Literature Study Groups

The following easily accessible professional resources can assist teachers in selecting engaging texts for middle grades literature study groups.

- The Association for Library Service to Children (a division of the American Library Association) provides lists of notable and award-winning books appropriate for this age group. (http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/index.cfm). Note especially the Children’s Notables lists that are divided into leveled categories, including books suggested for middle level and older readers.

- Middle school readers may vary widely in both reading level and maturity. For your more mature and capable readers, consider the recommendations and award recipients from the Young Adult Library Services Association (http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/yalsa/yalsa.cfm).

- Don Gallo has written a series of articles for The English Journal addressing “bold books” for classroom and personal reading. We suggest reading each of the pieces in this series, but two installments, Gallo (2006a) and Gallo (2006b), are of particular interest here.

- The suggested book list at the end of Grand Conversations: Literature Study Groups in Action by Peterson & Eeds (2007) provides sound recommendations of books that foster literature study dialogue and serves as a model for the kinds of books to select.

- A brief but powerful chapter in Adventuring with Books: A Booklist for PreK—Grade 6 (Leland & Harste, 2002) addresses books that foster critical dialogue. The specific books they suggest are appropriate for a wide range of readers, including those with reading abilities below that expected in middle school, but hold appeal for even older and more mature readers. Their list of criteria for selecting books that foster critical dialogue is, we believe, a vital guide for any educator.

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