

Ginger Goldman Malin with Christine Iacullo
and Melissa Drapatsky

Facilitating a Summer Reading Book Group Program

Summer book groups enhance and sustain student literacy behaviors over the break, making available an enjoyable social forum for critical-thinking and critical-reading practices to occur naturally. Significantly, the book groups grant faculty and students an informal space to connect meaningfully through reflective discussion of texts.

Book groups provide a powerful forum for readers to explore ideas and the world. Through sharing personal responses and collaboratively interpreting and constructing meaning from written texts, readers in book groups are involved in an activity that promotes reflection, creative and critical thinking, reading engagement, and a love of reading literature. Book groups thrive on discussions that encourage students to use collaborative discussion to enhance their thinking (Applebee; Hynds; Wilhelm).

As literature offers readers an emotional outlet while extending their understanding of other people, places, and historical times, it also has the capacity to evoke the personal connections needed for genuine self-reflection. Adolescents, in particular, need to engage with and respond to stories that help them imagine possible life experiences and situations.

Typical English classrooms do not necessarily foster this type of personal response to literature. A great deal of formal education has stressed that students simply be able to understand the basic implications or surface meanings of texts and be able to respond “correctly” to teacher-initiated questions (Mehan). Even in classrooms that do promote collaborative talk, the discussions tend to avoid the complicated social, cultural, and political issues

that are addressed in literature and that affect the daily lives of students because, for a variety of valid reasons, the classroom is not a place where students

or teachers feel comfortable sharing their personal responses to such issues.

Yet, adolescents are at a critical time in their lives. They are trying to figure out who they are now and who and what they want to become in the future. They need opportunities to explore their thinking and to examine the lenses through which they will view, approach, and interpret the world. As literature offers readers an emotional outlet while extending their understanding of other people, places, and historical times, it also has the capacity to evoke the personal connections needed for genuine self-reflection. Adolescents, in particular, need to engage with and respond to stories that help them imagine possible life experiences and situations.

Because book groups encourage readers to use literature as a starting place to talk about, and talk through, their personal responses regarding various topics, they can also be settings that enable adolescents to consider and perhaps even transform their beliefs and ideas without the same risks that abound in classroom settings. Schools should consider hosting extracurricular book groups similar to the Summer Reading Book Group program that Christine Iacullo, an English teacher at John Hersey High School (JHHS), created for students at her school. As a researcher interested in discovering innovative ways to encourage students to discuss literature, I worked with Christine and her colleague Melissa Drapatsky to understand the impact of this summer reading program.

Program Beginnings

The faculty at JHHS understood the importance of encouraging—or requiring—students to maintain their reading skills and strategies during the summer-break months. All students were required to read a specific text or texts during the summer break and return to school ready to take a written exam on it or them (see fig. 1). Teachers chose how much additional class time they wanted to spend on the text at the beginning of the school year. Although the summer books were engaging, well written, and of rather high interest to many readers, the assigned nature of the texts overrode the pleasure-reading aspect.

Dissatisfied with the existing program, Christine attended a summer reading program conference in Colorado in 2001, where she first learned of interesting alternatives for summer reading programs. Working with these ideas, she adopted and adapted the book-group model for her school.

The Summer Reading Book Group Program

In early April, to prepare for the summer program, teachers from all of the content areas and all of the administrators volunteered to participate as book-group leaders. By inviting the school's entire faculty to participate, program designers provided everyone in the school, not just the English teachers, an opportunity to read and discuss literature with the students and to connect with them personally. In fact, of the

thirty faculty members who participated in the program during the summer that I observed, only nine were English teachers. Even the principal and the football coach volunteered to lead book discussions.

The first task of the faculty book-group leaders was to choose a book. Since students chose to participate in the summer program, faculty members were free to choose any book; the titles did not need the standard approval from the school board (see fig. 2). With the available choices, at least one book probably appealed to every student both in terms of content and reading level. Next, each faculty member picked a date, a time, and a place to meet with the group (either on campus or in an off-site location such as a bookstore or coffee shop). Finally, the teacher or administrator prepared to lead the discussion by creating a list of questions and researching some pertinent background information, a task for which some participants looked to their English colleagues for guidance. Even though some leaders may have needed a confidence boost to lead a literature discussion, all of them were encouraged to talk about the book in a nonacademic way—leaving room for students to engage further with the text and broaden their initial understandings.

Christine created posters to hang on the walls in the front hallway of the school to elicit excitement for the individual book titles and the overall program. The posters featured pictures of book covers and included details about the plot or characters, intended to entice the student readers. The

FIGURE 1. Required Reading for JHHS Students during Summer Break

| Year in School | Title | Additional Honors Title(s) |
|----------------|--|---|
| Ninth grade | <i>A Time to Kill</i> (Grisham) | <i>Fahrenheit 451</i> (Bradbury) |
| Tenth grade | <i>Girl with the Pearl Earring</i> (Chevalier) | <i>The Odyssey</i> (Homer) |
| Eleventh grade | <i>The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair That Changed America</i> (Larson) | <i>Martin Dressler: The Tale of an American Dreamer</i> (Millhauser) <i>Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal</i> (Schlosser) <i>In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex</i> (Philbrick) |
| Twelfth grade | <i>There Are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America</i> (Kotlowitz) | <i>Wise Blood</i> (O'Connor) <i>A Confederacy of Dunces</i> (Toole) <i>A Thousand Acres</i> (Smiley) |

FIGURE 2. Books Offered in Book Group

| Book | Author | Date | Time | Place |
|---|----------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <i>Bleachers</i> | John Grisham | June 20 | 1:00 p.m. | Coffee shop |
| <i>Can't Be Satisfied: The Life and Times of Muddy Waters</i> | Robert Gordon | June 20 | 11:00 a.m. | Bookstore |
| <i>Where the Heart Is</i> | Billie Letts | June 21 | 1:00 p.m. | Coffee shop |
| <i>The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time</i> | Mark Haddon | June 21 | 1:30 p.m. | Restaurant |
| <i>Against All Enemies: Inside America's War on Terror</i> | Richard A. Clarke | June 29 | 3:00 p.m. | Restaurant |
| <i>Bringing Down the House: The Inside Story of Six M.I.T. Students Who Took Vegas for Millions</i> | Ben Mezrich | June 30 | 10:00 a.m. | Library |
| <i>The Dante Club</i> | Matthew Pearl | July 7 August 5 | 11:00 a.m. | Bookstore |
| <i>The Lovely Bones</i> | Alice Sebold | July 7 | 11:00 a.m. | Bookstore |
| <i>All Over but the Shoutin'</i> | Rick Bragg | July 8 | 1:00 p.m. | School |
| <i>The Education of Little Tree</i> | Forrest Carter | July 12 | 10:00 a.m. | Restaurant |
| <i>What Girls Learn</i> | Karin Cook | July 13 | 10:00 a.m. | School |
| <i>The Boys of Summer</i> | Roger Kahn | July 13 | 1:00 p.m. | School baseball diamond |
| <i>The Vanished Man</i> | Jeffery Deaver | July 14 | 10:00 a.m. | Restaurant |
| <i>The Samurai's Garden</i> | Gail Tsukiyama | July 19 | 9:00 a.m. | Restaurant |
| <i>The Old Man and the Sea</i> | Ernest Hemingway | July 19 | 1:30 p.m. | Boathouse on the lake |
| <i>Golf for Enlightenment: The Seven Lessons for the Game of Life</i> | Deepak Chopra | July 22 | 1:00 p.m. | Restaurant |
| <i>Uncle Sam's Plantation: How Big Government Enslaves America's Poor and What We Can Do about It</i> | Star Parker | July 27 | 9:00 a.m. | Restaurant |
| <i>Pledged: The Secret Life of Sororities</i> | Alexandra Robbins | July 27 July 28 | 11:00 a.m. | Coffee shop |
| <i>The Secret Life of Bees</i> | Sue Monk Kidd | July 27 | 12:00 p.m. | Restaurant |
| <i>Screwtape Letters</i> | C. S. Lewis | July 28 | 9:00 a.m. | Restaurant |
| <i>A Walk in the Woods: Rediscovering America on the Appalachian Trail</i> | Bill Bryson | July 29 | 10:00 a.m. | School |
| <i>The Perks of Being a Wallflower</i> | Stephen Chbosky | August 2 August 3 | 11:00 a.m. | School |
| <i>There Are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America</i> | Alex Kotlowitz | August 2 | 2:00 p.m. | Restaurant |
| <i>The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother</i> | James McBride | August 3 | 10:00 a.m. 2:00 p.m. | School |
| <i>Rogue Warrior</i> | Richard Marcinko | August 3 August 5 | 12:00 p.m. | Restaurant |
| <i>It's Not about the Bike: My Journey Back to Life</i> | Lance Armstrong | August 4 | 10:00 a.m. | Bookstore |
| <i>Running with the Buffaloes: A Season Inside with Mark Wetmore, Adam Goucher, and the University of Colorado Men's Cross-Country Team</i> | Chris Lear | August 4 | 10:00 a.m. | Bookstore |
| <i>Following Gandalf: Epic Battles and Moral Victory in The Lord of the Rings</i> | Matthew T. Dickerson | August 4 August 9 | 4:00 p.m. 3:00 p.m. | Restaurant |
| <i>Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls</i> | Mary Pipher | August 6 | 11:00 a.m. | Restaurant |
| <i>The Five People You Meet in Heaven</i> | Mitch Albom | August 6 | 3:30 p.m. | Bookstore |
| <i>Love</i> | Toni Morrison | August 19 | 11:00 a.m. | Bookstore |
| <i>Like Water for Chocolate: A Novel in Monthly Installments with Recipes, Romances, and Home Remedies</i> | Laura Esquivel | August 19 | 12:30 p.m. | Restaurant |
| <i>On the Road</i> | Jack Kerouac | August 19 | 1:00 p.m. | Coffee shop |
| <i>Caddy for Life: The Bruce Edwards Story</i> | John Feinstein | August 19 | 2:00 p.m. | Restaurant |

posters remained on the walls for approximately two weeks until sign-up day.

On sign-up day, a Friday in the middle of May, students raced to the cafeteria hallway during their lunch hour to sign up for their first choice of book and group. Since there was a maximum of ten students allowed in each group, students were eager to get their first choice. According to the students, there were four factors that determined their book-group choice, in order of priority: (1) the group in which their friends had signed up; (2) the faculty member who was leading the group; (3) the title of the book; (4) the time and date of the group discussion.

As shown in Figure 2, book groups met once during one of the summer months, and these meetings occurred at various times of the day. I observed four groups—one at a local fast-food restaurant, two at local coffee shops, and one at the neighborhood bookstore—and all were informal. The students either sat around a table or pulled chairs into a circle. The faculty leaders all began by asking the students what they thought about the book and the conversations blossomed from there. The role of the leaders varied in that some students asked the faculty members for their opinions about certain topics, and other leaders seemed to fit in as participants.

One important aspect of all of the discussions I observed was that they were free-flowing and the ideas naturally built on each other. Although the faculty leaders that I observed were armed with a list of possible discussion questions, they rarely referred to it because the conversations flowed so naturally. In fact, at the end of each of the ninety-minute discussions, many students remarked that they were surprised by how quickly the time had passed. Another interesting aspect of the book groups was the regularity with which students applied intertextual knowledge (Bloome and Egan-Robertson), by which they juxtaposed two texts to make sense of what they were discussing. They also offered personal stories or experiences to support their responses to the texts, thereby including the other participants in their thinking. In this way, the students were co-constructing meanings about the texts by sharing their existing knowledge to make sense of what they were reading and discussing—an element that I see quite often in successful adult book-group discussions.

Another notable aspect of these book groups was the display of what Heath called *literate behaviors* (3). Through their discussion, these participants compared ideas, sequenced events, reflected, argued, interpreted, and communicated responses—all behaviors that required a certain mastery of language, thought, and literary competence. In responding to the text and to each other, the participants carefully and deliberately tried to make sense of the text, evaluate their own and others' viewpoints, and solve literary dilemmas. These readers naturally engaged in critical-thinking and critical-reading practices. Probably the most striking features of the program were that this type of engagement and criticism occurred without much prompting from the faculty leader and that the majority of students considered talking about books in this critical way to be both pleasurable and fun.

Due to logistics, the large number of students enrolled at JHHS, and faculty availability, the program was only open to incoming seniors. Approximately 85 percent chose to participate. Students who chose not to participate in a summer book group or who were not present on the day of the discussion were required to read and take a written exam on the assigned book(s) for seniors (see fig. 1) when they returned to school in the fall. Each participant in the program turned in a card to the leader with his or her name on it, and the leader indicated whether or not his or her participation was adequate to receive a voucher for completing the summer reading requirement.

What Was Gained?

The most exciting aspect of this program was the gains for participating students and faculty, particularly regarding their feelings about reading. Both students and faculty learned to see reading as an enjoyable and interesting social event. Too often in school, students view reading as a chore. Many feel that the purpose of reading a book is to take a test

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or write a paper. In this program, students realized that reading together could encourage them to think critically about a certain phenomenon, and in many cases it helped them learn something new

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about a topic or about their perspectives. One student explained that in summer book group, “reading isn’t boring. It was so cool to talk like that with a teacher. I wish we could talk about books more like that in school. I would read more if we could talk about books like that . . . no tests and stuff, just like, what we think. You know, it

was kind of fun.” Another student stated, “I didn’t know anything about sororities before, but I was worried about it because I am going to college next year. This book [*Pledged: The Secret Life of Sororities*] totally made me feel better because it explained them and it was cool to know that I wasn’t the only one, you know, the other girls in the group also were scared about it too.”

Faculty members also expressed positive feelings about participating. Oftentimes, teachers become overly concerned with teaching all of the literary aspects of a book and lose sight of the enjoyment of sharing a wonderfully engaging story with students. However, in this summer reading program, the high-interest stories made the reading process entertaining and pleasurable. Also, during the summer break there were no other school reading obligations, and the participants were free to read at their own pace without feeling academic pressure. Without the need to evaluate students in the typical fashion, faculty members could relate to students personally—similar to the ways available to faculty members who coach or lead after-school activities. In fact, one teacher, who is a member of the technical science department, explained that he did not teach literature in his classes. He therefore relished the opportunity to talk with students in the book group about the important ideas evoked by the literature: “I have known some of these kids for years, and yet through this program, I was able to bond with them in a new way through the book discussion.”

Students and faculty read high-interest, well-written literature and shared their responses in an

informal yet stimulating forum. Since the book groups were held during the summer months, students remained connected to the school, their classmates, and their teachers while practicing reading skills and literacy behaviors that were often not maintained during the long summer break from school. Without the pressure of formal evaluation, students and faculty members connected meaningfully through discussion. As in other book groups that I have observed, the social aspect of reading and sharing responses encouraged readers to see reading as an enjoyable experience that could be shared with others. Through discussion, participants considered their responses to the literature and compared them to others’ ideas. In doing so, the group was able to practice necessary literacy behaviors by which they learned to view reading literature as a pleasurable way to understand aspects of themselves and the world better—a goal that I am sure all English teachers strive to achieve.

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Ginger Goldman Malin is assistant professor of secondary education at DePaul University. Along with studying book groups and response to literature, she also advises The Discussions Group, a Web-based teacher and adult book-group discussion forum. **Christine Iacullo** has been an English teacher at John Hersey High School for eleven years and **Melissa Drapatsky**, a secondary reading specialist, has been at John Hersey High School for seven years. *email*: gmalin@depaul.edu.

READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

Malin, Iacullo, and Drapatsky discuss a phenomenal summer reading program, where students and teachers meet together to discuss pieces of literature. "Authentic Persuasive Writing to Promote Summer Reading" helps students prepare for such a summer reading book program. Students are invited to create brochures and flyers that suggest books and genres to explore during the summer months. This lesson can be customized to focus on another time of year or specific topic. Because the students have ownership for the texts suggested, they will be more motivated to participate. http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=312