
Revitalizing Teaching and Learning through Class Reading Communities

Tyler McBride, Lincoln Consolidated School District, Lincoln, AR; joined NCTE 2011 with Vicki S. Collet, University of Arkansas; joined NCTE 2005, CEL 2014

Since I started teaching four years ago, my first and most important goal has been to share the love of reading with my students. I've gone out of my way to build a large classroom library, which now consists of about a thousand books. I've carved out time in my curriculum for students to read self-selected books and discuss what they read. I've given book talks and showed book trailers at the beginning of class. I've talked with students about what they read. I've experimented with ways to hold high expectations for reading while not drowning my students' joy in endless book reports and projects. I continue to read young adult and middle grade novels almost exclusively, leaving my "grown-up" bookshelf at home to gather dust. And I've made sure to make my reading life visible to my students; as Donalyn Miller writes in *Reading in the Wild*: "The most effective reading teachers are teachers who read" (2013, p. 106).

Inspired by Professional Reading

My passion for reading with my students was inspired by my own reading of professional texts. I read books like Miller's *The Book Whisperer* (2009) and *Reading in the Wild* (2013). I devoured Penny Kittle's *Book Love* (2013). And, when I read Nancy Atwell's *In the Middle*, I was flabbergasted to find out that teachers had been teaching this way for decades. *Why couldn't I have had a teacher who loved reading enough to share it as these teachers did?* These approaches have served me well during my first few years as a teacher.

Roadblocks to Building a Reading Community

After my third year of teaching, I took a position at a different school. However, this "new school" wasn't actually new to me. I was moving to the middle school in my hometown, and I soon found out I would be teaching in the same classroom where I once took seventh-grade keyboarding. As I painstakingly boxed up my classroom library, piled the books in my car, stored them in my garage, and then (weeks later) carefully carried the boxes into my new classroom one by one, I found myself wondering what the year would be like. I was full of optimism as I sorted through the books, shelving each one according to its genre. I planned which book talks I would give during the first week of school. I set up check-in and check-out procedures for my library. I even planned a "Book Frenzy" for the first day, following Miller's model in *The Book Whisperer*.

When the students arrived, though, I realized the year was different somehow. The school itself wasn't all that different from the school I was leaving—both were small rural schools in the same county. However, I still had to adjust to new colleagues and a different school. And somehow my well-established

patterns of providing independent reading time hit a roadblock when the year got underway.

Integrated Curriculum

One of the major changes I faced was that instead of teaching seventh- and eighth-grade language arts, I was teaching integrated block sections of seventh-grade language arts and social studies. This meant that, in addition to the normal challenges of adjusting to a new school, I was also facing the challenges of a new curriculum and a new subject.

I knew that integrating English language arts and social studies could be beneficial. Integration allows students to see how literacy is used in the world beyond the classroom, how it can make learning more engaging, and how it fosters deeper concept development (Smith & Irvine, 2012). However, teachers often aren't trained in methods for integrating curricula and may feel unprepared (Levstik, 2008). This was certainly true for me. Incorporating social studies content that I was unfamiliar with was a challenge.

Preplanned Curricula

Another difference was the preplanned curriculum I was expected to teach. I had inherited a curriculum that had been planned before I was hired. It laid out the standards that would be covered each quarter and included some whole-class novels that I hadn't even read before. I was going from completely planning my own curriculum at my previous position to having core texts already chosen for me. Having to teach texts I wasn't familiar with was just one more thing that added to my stress. Because I had read each text only once before teaching it, I was more focused on

I was going from completely planning my own curriculum at my previous position to having core texts already chosen for me.

becoming familiar with the texts than on choosing the best ways for my students to approach them.

Using preplanned curricula can shift teachers' attention away from meeting their students' needs (Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008). When I recognized that my reading community was derailed, I knew that being less student focused was one of the contributing factors.

Technology Integration

Added to these challenges was the responsibility of a one-to-one student laptop program that I was not used to managing in my classroom. Although the technology has proven to be an asset for many aspects of instruction and can be a tool to increase students' engagement, social interaction, and depth of thinking (McKenna, Conradi, Lawrence, Jang, & Meyer, 2012; Brozo, Shiel, & Topping, 2008), initially it felt like one more thing for me to do.

Classroom Management

Finally, I had a few students whose behavior made me question whether I had any classroom management skills at all. Although early-career teachers often cite classroom management as a concern (Anhorn, 2008; Fantilli & McDougall, 2009), I'd been able to create a positive classroom environment in my previous school. These new students' behaviors, however, distracted me from routines and procedures that had worked in the past.

Downward Spiral

All of these challenges combined to create the perfect conditions for my confidence and my instruction to start slipping. Without realizing it, I had stopped giving book talks when I thought students weren't listening or didn't care. Time for students to read their own books in class decreased, replaced by time spent on whole-class novels and the social studies curriculum. I didn't create a habit of talking with students regularly about their reading as I had in previous years. Reading time became

a chore—I began to think that my job was to squelch conversations and noise during reading time, instead of fostering joy and engagement in reading. Even while I taught whole-class novels, my instruction fell flat. Instead of a classroom filled with discussion, critical thinking, and engagement, I had a class filled with worksheets, bored kids, and a joyless teacher.

I was on a downward spiral. When one or two difficult students said they were bored or pushed back, I resorted to subpar management techniques like restricting freedoms for the whole class. As a result, more students became bored or argumentative. And, it was "easier" (in the short term) to plan worksheets and activities for the students to do by themselves, which I thought would decrease my classroom management issues. Instead, because my students were not being challenged, stimulated, or engaged, the behavior problems in my class multiplied.

Somewhere between winter break and spring break, I started to hate myself as a teacher. I felt like a complete failure. I came home from work stressed, worried about the next day all evening, went to bed full of anxiety, and woke up the next morning dreading my day at work. At several points along the way, I seriously considered leaving the profession.

Turning Point

Then came a turning point. Somewhere around February or March—I can't nail it down to one "ah-ha" moment—I started to realize that I had completely lost what made me love teaching in the first place. I distinctly remember a few days as I watched my students: I saw my classroom library gathering dust, and I observed my students mindlessly staring back and forth between their books and the clock, longing for reading time to be over. I realized that I wasn't teaching my students to enjoy reading; I was actually teaching them that reading was just a chore, something to endure during class

then forget about at home. I was completely negating my own goals as a teacher, and I had lost my joy in the process.

I was not so far removed from my first few years of teaching that I couldn't remember seeing a spark in students' eyes as they talked about reading. I remembered students running into class to beg frantically for the next book in a series or to interrupt another class so they could talk to me about a twist in the last chapter.

Revisit Professional Texts

I decided to go back to my mentors. I reread *The Book Whisperer* and *Reading in the Wild* over the course of a single weekend. I slowly started to renew my hope. Teaching was still difficult because I was dealing with students who had become accustomed to my bad habits in classroom management and instruction. There were still days when I came home tired and full of worry, but it was a different kind of worry. I wasn't worrying about what I was going to do, I was worrying about how I was going to do it.

Changing Routines

I immediately started by carving out more time for reading, reflecting, and discussing books in class. I dedicated one-third of the class to independent reading and reflection. I used this time to start talking with students about what they were reading. I didn't quiz them during these conversations, but I tried to engage with them authentically in ways I hadn't before. I gave book talks and showed book trailers at least twice a week. I pulled books from my shelves, handed them out, and told students, "I really enjoyed this book and I think you will, too."

Immediate Change

I started to see a change almost immediately. It wasn't that every student miraculously fell in love with reading, but a few did. One student—I'll call her Alicia here — began reading Rick Riordan's books and didn't stop until she had read

every single one on my shelf. Earlier in the year, Alicia had been known to surreptitiously use her phone to text her friends behind her book. She had pretended to read most days, but when I talked to her she couldn't explain in any detail what had happened in the chapter she had just read. When I gave her the space to read, she discovered Rick Riordan on her own. And, as I recommended other books and gave her support and encouragement, she discovered a love for reading.

On her reading survey at the beginning of the year, I could tell that, at best, Alicia was indifferent toward reading, and my observations throughout the first half of the year confirmed this. But, by the time she filled out her end-of-the-year survey, she was ecstatic about reading. When asked why she read more this year than last year, she wrote: "Because I finally found a genre I will read. Plus, I found an author that I think writes

Why did I spend so much time with mindless tasks, pointless worksheets, and effectively wasted class days?

the best books IN THE WORLD." (The emphasis is hers.)

Frustrations

I had a few other students like Alicia, but not every student in my class was a success story. There are students who will continue to haunt me as long as I continue teaching. There is Matt, who came into my class and left my class barely able to decode many words. There is Carter, who asked to go to the bathroom nearly every day to avoid having to read, then moved in the middle of the year before I realized that I was failing him. Or Keith, with whom I could have built

a relationship, but instead allowed to pull me into arguments and confrontations almost every day.

One Day, One Book

Another student—I'll call her Nadine—showed me what could happen despite my perceived failures as a teacher. Nadine is an English language learner who was so quiet and reserved that on most days I barely heard her speak. Throughout the year, I noticed her starting to read more and more. At the beginning of the year, she slowly read sci-fi books that most of my students had already read—*The Hunger Games* series, for example. However, as the year went on, the books she read became thicker and thicker and she devoured them more and more rapidly. At one point, she read the *Legend* trilogy in the course of about a week and a half. By the time I realized that my teaching was failing most of the readers in my classroom, she had already devoured the sci-fi section in my library and started bringing in books of her own, all of which were at least 500 pages long.

When I sat down with Nadine at the end of the year to talk to her about her reading, she admitted that she had read exponentially more this year than previous years. When I wanted to know why, she simply replied that last summer her sister had taken her to the library one day, and she found a book she liked. Was that it? I asked her. Yes, she replied. That was what had made her want to start reading. One day at the library with someone she had a close relationship with had changed her life and made her a reader.

Nadine's story has filled me with more hope and inspiration than I can put into words. Why did I spend so much time with mindless tasks, pointless worksheets, and effectively wasted class days? Most (perhaps all) of my students won't remember what I said when I lectured about Afghanistan as we read *The Breadwinner* together. Yes, I want them to learn about the world and

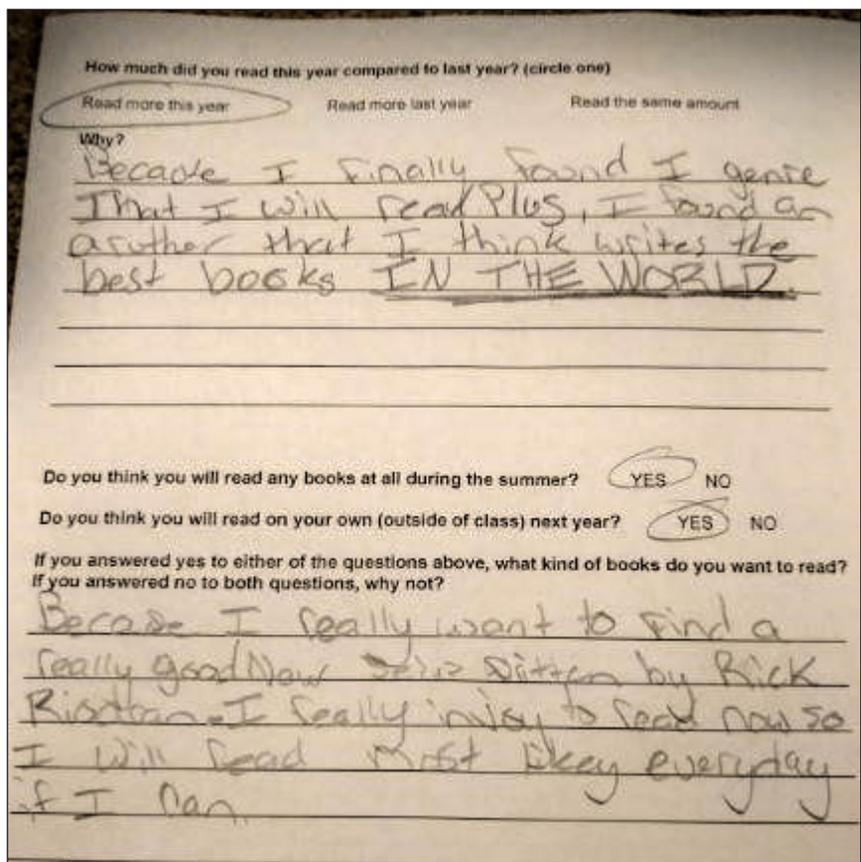


Figure 1. Alicia's End-of-Year Reading Survey

see things from a global perspective. Yes, I want to read common texts with my students to have a shared experience for strategy instruction and rich discussion. But the most important thing I can do as a middle school language arts teacher, without exception, is to make sure my students leave for high school with a love of reading. They'll easily forget what I told them, but they won't easily lose the joy of reading once they find it.

I'm looking toward next year with optimism. I've made mistakes, but I've learned from them. Matt, Carter, Keith, and others whom I believe I've failed will always be in my mind. I have to remember them. If I forget, it means I've become lazy again and will return to the same mistakes sooner or later. To be the best teacher I can, I have to remember my failures as well as my successes. In the end, Nadine's story gives me hope—if one day at the library can change a student's life, then what kind of amazing feats can I accomplish with nine months of instruction and a classroom full of books? ●

Join the conversation:
[@tylerdmcbride](#)
[@vscollet](#)

References

- Anhorn, R. (2008). The profession that eats its young. *The Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin*, 74(3), 15–21.
- Atwell, N. (1987). *In the middle: Writing, reading, and learning with adolescents*. Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook.
- Brozo, W. G., Shiel, G., & Toppings, K. (2008). Engagement in reading: Lessons learned from three PISA countries. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 51(4), 304–315.
- Fantilli, R. D., & McDougall, D. E. A study of novice teachers: Challenges and supports in the first years. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 25(6), 814–825.
- Kittle, P. (2013). *Book love: Developing depth, stamina, and passion in adolescent readers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Levstik, L. S. (2008). What happens in social studies classrooms? Research on K–12 social studies practice. In L. S. Levstik & C. A. Tyson (Eds.), *Handbook of research in social studies education* (pp. 50–62). New York, NY: Routledge.
- McKenna, M. C., Conradi, K., Lawrence, C., Jang, B. G., & Meyer, J. P. (2012). Reading attitudes of middle school students: Results of a U.S. Survey. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 47(3), 283–306.
- Miller, D., & Anderson, J. (2009). *The book whisperer: Awakening the inner reader in every child*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Miller, D., & Kelley, S. (2013). *Reading in the wild: The book whisperer's keys to cultivating lifelong reading habits*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Schoen, L., & Fusarelli, L. D. (2008). Innovation, NCLB, and the fear factor: The challenge of leading 21st-century schools in an era of accountability. *Educational Policy*, 22(1), 181–203.
- Smith, M. S., & Irvine, D. B. (2012). A case for integrating language arts methods with social studies methods in a teacher preparation program. In J. Cassidy, S. Grote-Garcia, E. Martinez, & R. Garcis (Eds.), *What's hot in literacy 2012 Yearbook* (pp. 24–29). San Antonio, TX: Specialized Literacy Professionals/Texas Association for Literacy Education. Retrieved from http://www.texasreaders.org/uploads/8/6/6/5/8665759/chapter_four

Student Reading

- Collins, S. (2008). *The hunger games*. New York: Scholastic Press.
- Collins, S. (2009). *Catching fire*. New York: Scholastic Press.
- Collins, S. (2010). *Mockingjay*. New York: Scholastic Press.
- Ellis, D. (2001). *The breadwinner*. Berkeley, CA: Publishers Group West.
- Lu, M. (2011). *Legend*. New York, NY: G. P. Putnam's Sons.
- Lu, M. (2013). *Champion: A Legend novel*. New York, NY: G. P. Putnam's Sons.
- Lu, M. (2013). *Prodigy*. New York, NY: G. P. Putnam's Sons.

August 2017 Call for Manuscripts: Leveraging Librarians

“Today’s school librarian works with both students and teachers to facilitate access to information in a wide variety of formats, instruct students and teachers how to acquire, evaluate and use information and the technology needed in this process, and introduces children and young adults to literature and other resources to broaden their horizons. As a collaborator, change agent, and leader, the school librarian develops, promotes, and implements a program that will help prepare students to be effective users of ideas and information, a lifelong skill.”—[American Association of School Librarians](#)

This issue of *ELQ* is dedicated to discussing the innovative work that literacy educators do with their school librarians and community librarians. How are ELA educators leveraging the expertise of their school librarians to improve learning experiences for their students? How are library media specialists collaborating with teachers and administrators to build a community of readers, writers, and researchers? How is the role of the librarian changing in the face of the CCSS and standardized testing? How are librarians insuring that their roles and the spaces they steward in schools are of high value to all learners? Deadline: **May 15, 2017**