The Book Club Companion

Fostering Strategic Readers in the Secondary Classroom

Cindy O’Donnell-Allen

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For Lexie and Lynley,
Austen and Will,
whom I would deem amazing
even if they didn’t belong to me
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What Is a Book Club Anyway?

Book clubs have been a staple in my classroom for more than fifteen years, though I wasn’t calling them that in the beginning. As I explain in Chapter 3, book clubs started out as “novel workshops” in my classroom, and it was only the rising popularity of the term book club in mainstream culture, coupled with my exposure to The Book Club Connection (McMahon and Raphael 1997), that made me rethink the name. I have learned that book clubs hold great potential for meeting the needs of a wide range of adolescent readers, but when I tell other secondary teachers about them, the first question they inevitably ask goes something like this: “What’s the difference between book clubs and old-fashioned reading groups or literature circles?”

My all-purpose answer is that book clubs are small groups of readers that meet on a regular basis to systematically discuss books (and other texts) of the members’ choice. These groups use a variety of response methods to prompt and extend book club discussion, and membership varies according to the desired configuration. In other words, the key feature of book clubs is flexibility.

Let me flesh out this definition one key concept at a time:

1. **Book clubs are made up of small groups of readers.** I’ve found the optimum size of book clubs to be four to six readers. Though it’s possible to meet in a trio, one absent member puts an undue onus on those who remain when the club suddenly becomes a couple. Couples often gravitate to one or the other end of the spectrum of conflict versus complementarity. Since one of the great benefits of book clubs is exploring the diversity of individual members’ responses to texts, and pairs tend to minimize that diversity, starting off with three members is a risk that will almost surely result in pairs of readers and a corresponding lack of diversity at some point. Book clubs exceeding the number of six are also problematic but for the opposite reason. In a group this large, the responses of individuals tend to be obscured. When one can get lost in the crowd,
so can the benefits of small-group discourse, namely the intellectual stretching that comes as a result of holding one’s ideas up against others’.

2. **Book clubs meet on a regular basis.** In working with readers from middle school through graduate school, I’ve found that with secondary students, weekly meetings have proved optimal. Book clubs need to meet often enough to maintain momentum yet not so often as to prevent time for reading and independent mulling over of ideas.

   Television series play weekly for a reason. A week is just long enough to look forward to the next episode without forgetting or tiring of the plot. Book clubs are much the same way. When students meet less frequently than once a week, they are likely to have trouble maintaining collaborative memory or momentum. They may lose track of key plot developments or forget where the group left off conceptually last time. And they’re unlikely to develop an ongoing set of key questions or themes that crop up repeatedly in the text. Even when students have completed individual written responses, they may forget the detail that made the response seem so important at the time and thus be less likely to offer it up for the group’s consideration. It would be a shame to rob book clubs of the chance to act as a testing ground.

   Yet meeting too frequently is also problematic. Kids are busy, busy, busy, and when book clubs meet twice or more a week, students often don’t have time to complete a good chunk of independent reading. And prepare a substantive response. And go to hockey practice. And wash the dishes. And check their email. And so on. The kind of reflective reading made possible by book clubs also takes time. I recently had the pleasure of hosting my high school daughter’s book club on *East of Eden*. Students would often open their weekly meetings with the phrase “Well, I’ve been thinking a lot this week about . . . ,” and they would fill in the blank with everything from the significance of biblical allusions to the origins of good and evil. *East of Eden* is a tough book for most adults, much less fifteen-year-olds, and had the group met daily, I’m doubtful they would have had time to mull over their ideas long enough to synthesize them into more significant conclusions.

   When students meet less or more than once a week, book clubs can fail either way. When students have forgotten why they’re meeting in the first place or they aren’t meaningfully prepared to participate, conversations are superficial at best, and their minds and, soon, their behaviors begin to wander. Additionally, on the days in between book club meetings, teachers have the opportunity to teach new reading strategies and thematically
related shorter texts or make time for related projects, writing workshops, and independent reading.

3. **Book clubs engage in systematic discussion.** In my first few years of using book clubs, which I describe in detail in Chapter 3, I found that individual book clubs inevitably establish their own routines, but students appreciate a system that outlines the before, during, and after. In other words, they want to know how to prepare for book club, what will happen when they get there, and what will come after they’ve finished the book, as far as final projects and evaluation go. In terms of what happens **during** book club, discussions are at least initially prompted by the individual responses students make to the books they’re reading between weekly meetings. Even though students identify the topics worth talking about, they need structured support in keeping track of these individual responses, and they also need advance notice of how these responses will come into play during meetings. I have discovered the hard way that you can’t simply ask students to read their individual responses and expect that a magical discussion will ensue. In fact, more often than not, this approach typically results in recitations followed by a whole lot of dead air. So how do you get kids to make meaningful conversation about books?

You provide a road map of sorts—one that offers enough direction so they won’t wander aimlessly and they can keep track of where they’re going but that also allows for freedom in selecting from among the multiple roads to Rome. As much as we’d like for it to be true, all students don’t grow up in households where books are read and discussed on a regular basis the way they are in book clubs. This doesn’t mean students don’t read and discuss other texts outside of our classrooms or hear and tell stories again and again within their families. But we’re asking them to talk about specific texts (usually literary) in specific ways (usually rooted in literary theories and literacy research) in a specific context (our English classrooms). We have to help them learn, rather than expect them to come to us already knowing, the system that I discuss for the rest of this book.

4. **Book clubs discuss books (and other texts) of the members’ choice.** Book clubs work best when kids get to choose the books. This means that different book clubs are reading different books all at the same time. If you choose one book for everyone in the class to read, don’t expect that students will have the literary experience of a lifetime simply because you’ve put them in small groups, or pseudo book clubs, to discuss it. Why not just teach the book to the entire class in this case?
At least since Dewey, educators have known that curiosity and learning go hand in hand, yet students rarely have a say in what they get taught in school. Book clubs provide a natural opportunity for them to do so and to grow as readers in the process. Why? Because choice allows students to discover and develop their own reader identities. Choice creates ownership because students have a real say in crafting the curriculum. But most importantly, choice increases the likelihood of buy-in, which increases motivation to read.

Of course, even in book clubs, choices are usually limited by external constraints, such as book budgets, curricular expectations, developmental appropriateness, community sensibilities, and so forth. To meet these constraints in my high school classroom, I selected five to six books that were varied enough to appeal to a wide range of kids yet had enough in common to cohere around a particular theme, say rebels, trailblazers, and scapegoats. Then I offered a brief book talk on each book and asked kids to list for me their top three choices. From there, I sorted the votes and adjusted the groups so that each book club had four to six reasonably compatible members. I use this method to this day because it has been fail-safe in ensuring students one of their top three choices.

5. Book clubs use a variety of open-ended response methods to prompt and extend book club discussion. Because book clubs are flexible enough to incorporate a range of instructional strategies, they can be tailored to meet various constellations of reader needs and preferences, teacher objectives, and instructional standards. Consider, for instance, a group of seventh graders with whom I worked in Stan McReynolds’s English class. This all-boy book club was highly motivated to read Art Spiegelman’s Maus, reluctant to write about it, but willing to respond with sketches in kind. Stan and I wanted their responses to prompt book club discussion about the most significant events in the book up to this point. Grade-level standards required the development of prediction strategies, but since visual responses would be insufficient preparation for their upcoming standardized tests, we knew it was also important that students write.

Consequently, we asked students to create visual reading logs in preparation for book club (Note: All response tools mentioned in this and subsequent chapters are included in Appendix C). The log, which we named 1-2-3-Predict, consisted of four rectangles. In the first three rectangles, students drew the three most important events in the section of the book they’d just read. In the space under each of these rectangles, students wrote a caption explaining the significance of the illustrated event. In the
fourth rectangle, students sketched a scene predicting what they thought might happen in the next section of the book. The caption under this rectangle explained why this event was likely to occur.

These reading logs appealed to students because they were allowed to draw. The logs worked for Stan and me because students were required to make interpretive decisions about the text’s most important events that would likely encourage meaningful book club discussion, especially when students chose different events. The logs also met standards surrounding the skills of prediction and inference because they supplied a visualization strategy students could use later in the book and with other texts as well. Finally, the logs gave students practice in justifying their interpretations through writing, the medium preferred on standardized tests.

In using book clubs with eleventh graders in my honors English class, students’ needs, my objectives, and instructional standards were vastly different from those that guided my work with Stan’s seventh graders. Thus the response tools varied as well. As I describe in Chapter 3, students wrote Real Books Letters in preparation for book clubs, used book club discussion records to keep track of their responses, and produced readers’ theatre scripts and analytical essays as final projects. The constants in both settings, however, were the open-ended nature of the response strategies and, of course, the book club setting itself.

6. Book club membership varies according to the desired configuration. Book clubs typically are made up only of same-aged students, but they sometimes include a teacher or more able peer as well. In my high school classroom, book clubs are made up only of students enrolled in the class. While students meet, I browse around the room, making observational notes, eavesdropping on book club conversations, and sometimes sitting in, but only for a few moments. In this case, I provide considerable front-loading so that students understand my expectations, book club logistics, and culminating assessments before they go it alone.

When possible or desirable, however, book clubs can also benefit from the presence of a teacher or classroom volunteer such as a parent, grandparent, or older student. Again, substantial front-loading is required but this time for the purpose of helping volunteers understand that their goal is to help students become more independent readers by facilitating rather than dominating book club discussion. These volunteers can act as mentors, increasing student motivation for reading and modeling the interpretive processes engaged readers typically use. While I don’t recommend ability grouping in book clubs, mentors can benefit readers at every
developmental level by providing extra support for struggling readers and enrichment for highly motivated and advanced readers.

**Distinguishing Book Clubs from Reading Groups, Small-Group Discussions, and Literature Circles**

Obviously, I’m not the first person to suggest that discussing books in small groups is a good idea. But the small groups I’ve just described are not identical to other familiar configurations like reading groups complete with round-robin reading, small-group discussions, and literature circles. In the following sections, I explain some of the differences.

**How Book Clubs Differ from Reading Groups**

Even we secondary teachers are probably familiar with traditional reading groups where an elementary teacher sits in the curve of a kidney-shaped table and listens to children read aloud, round-robin style, from short texts. Assigned by the teacher, these short texts, usually found in basal readers, contain controlled vocabulary at students’ developmental reading level. The discourse in reading groups is typically controlled as well. While students take turns reading, the teacher corrects or helps with pronunciation and then asks questions intended to check students’ comprehension of literal details found in the passage. Aside from their size and regular meeting times, reading groups bear no other resemblance to book clubs because they do not allow students to choose texts, use a variety of response tools, or participate in discussion aimed at extended interpretation. In fact, as Bernice Cullinan notes in her introduction to *The Book Club Connection* (1997), although student participation seems to be central in traditional reading groups, these groups are actually teacher centered since teachers get to make all the important decisions and also do most of the talking.

Even though teacher-led reading groups are more commonplace in elementary classrooms than in secondary ones, the primary method used in these groups, that is, round-robin reading, is still a staple in many English classrooms, especially when teachers want students to focus simultaneously on a lengthy text, such as a play, a book chapter, or a longish short story. Round-robin reading feels right because it’s so familiar. The practice does seem democratic because everyone takes a turn, and it appears unifying.
because everyone is ostensibly on the same page. Yet such reading might more accurately be referred to as recitation.

Since at least 1979 (True), round-robin reading hasn’t been recommended for several reasons. First of all, less capable readers can find the performance element present in reading groups to be nerve-racking and sometimes embarrassing, and their reading is sometimes difficult to follow when pronunciation or comprehension difficulties disrupt the pace of the story. Even though these readers do need more practice, reading aloud in front of their peers isn’t the best way for them to get it. Beers (2003) recommends buddy reading or guided reading as good alternatives that help adolescent readers achieve reading fluency.

Second, if a text is appropriate for students to read aloud, they should be able to read it independently. If the text is too difficult for students to read for themselves but is still appropriate to their interests, then this text would be a good choice for the teacher to read to the entire class. Also, during round-robin reading, the students who aren’t reading are often unfocused on the text for the majority of the time and catch up right before their turn arrives. Students have perfected this technique. Once when I was observing a student teacher who had asked students to read *Romeo and Juliet* in this manner, I saw students passing notes, filing their nails, completing homework for other classes, in short, doing anything but engaging with the text while they waited for their turn to read. Because round-robin reading can be tedious, students can easily lose interest in the text.

So why are reading groups and round-robin reading still so common? Because they are as familiar to teachers as grammar workbooks and spelling tests on Fridays, and old traditions die hard. Remembering that these exercises didn’t hurt us as students, reasoning that we turned out all right, and unaware of better alternatives, we sometimes just teach as we were taught. Yet even able, fluent adult readers often have difficulty recalling details of a text during round-robin reading because they are so focused on the performance aspect of reading aloud. In other words, good intentions not withstanding, traditional reading groups that feature round-robin reading can actually inhibit students from engaging with texts and constructing meaning with one another.

That’s why most of the reading students do for book clubs actually takes place silently prior to the book club meeting, either for homework or during independent reading time in class. Of course students often read passages aloud to the rest of the group during book club discussions. The difference is they do so by choice and in the service of interpretation, usually to bolster a claim they’re making in a student-centered conversation.
How Book Clubs Differ from Small-Group Discussions

Back in 1985, the buzzword was *cooperative learning*. I still believe that small groups are especially effective contexts for literature discussions, but I don’t believe small-group discussions of literature are necessarily akin to book clubs. That’s because the tasks these small groups are asked to complete are often teacher centered. Let me illustrate with an example from my first few years of teaching.

In my undergraduate methods class, we pored over poems and short stories and designed small-group discussion questions based on George Hillocks’ (1980) well-known hierarchy that ranks questions according to how they gauge different levels of comprehension, from literal to inferential. As I understood it then, my job as an English teacher was to read a text as closely as I could, squeeze out all its meaning, and then design questions along this hierarchy for the purpose of leading my students toward the same—need I even say it, “sophisticated”—interpretation I had reached. Students would meet in small groups to answer these study questions, as I called them, and in the process would grasp all that was essential about the text, absorbing from my example what it meant to ask important questions about literature.

Only, when I eagerly tried my questions out on my students, this didn’t actually happen. True, classes were predictable, and students were mostly dutiful, but all of us were bored stiff. Were students in small groups? Yes. Were they discussing books? Yes. Weren’t these book clubs, then? No, because even though I wasn’t actually sitting in on the groups, I might as well have been. They were as teacher centered as it gets.

I wasn’t surprised at the conclusions students reached because I’d confined their so-called inquiry as carefully as a Hot Wheels car to my own interpretive track. Their chief concern was getting the right answer—read, my answer—because they never got to pose any questions of their own. And because I never asked them to reflect on the nature of the questions I was asking, they didn’t learn strategies for doing so. In fact, I was the one using all the strategies because I was the one asking all the questions.

In book clubs, students still use teacher-designed response tools, but these are far more open-ended, demanding that students make independent interpretive choices and develop awareness of the strategies they’re implementing so they can transfer these to future texts. Because these individual responses are then used to fuel book club discussions, and individuals seldom see one text one way, students are more inclined to question and challenge, to augment and extend—in other words, to construct meaning together.
How Book Clubs Differ from Literature Circles

Harvey Daniels deserves most of the credit for making literature circles the classroom version of a household term. In the second edition of *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups*, Daniels (2002) uses the terms *reading groups*, *book clubs*, and *literature circles* interchangeably and defines them as “student-led small-group book discussions” (18). Sounds a lot like my definition of book clubs, right?

Well, yes and no. And that’s probably because I was using book clubs in my classroom for several years before I even knew that literature circles existed. This is neither good nor bad, but simply so. Some of the features of literature circles that Daniels emphasizes are also common to my definition of book clubs—namely, small-group contexts, routine scheduling, and student choice in texts and topics. Before I begin enumerating the differences between literature circles and book clubs, however, I want to be very clear. In doing so, I am not arguing that literature circles ought to be abandoned because book clubs are the only way. If I did so, I would be negating a method that many teachers value as indispensable in their classrooms. Rather, I want to describe some of the logistical differences between the two and explain how they are informed by different principles for literary response and small-group learning that result in curricular flexibility.

**LOGISTICAL DIFFERENCES** The first difference has to do with book club duration and membership. Daniels (2002) stresses that literature circles are temporary and task based: “Once they have finished their job—reading and discussing a book of common interest—the group disbands and individual members find their way into new, different groups by picking their next book” (19). Certainly this can be, and has been, the case in my classroom. But sometimes, a book club works so hard to build a context distinguished by equal degrees of challenge and support that they understandably want to stay together. Like many adult book clubs I know, such groups privilege the relationship they’ve formed over the book they’ve read.

Take my friend Jane, for example, whose daughter plays on my daughter’s soccer team. Jane comes to many soccer games with book in hand, reading up for her adult book club during warm-ups and halftime, and I’m always there to ask, “Whatcha reading? Is it any good?” More than once, I’ve been surprised by her answer. The last time Jane confessed that she didn’t really like the book, I had to ask why she continued with the book club.
“Oh, honey,” she said, “it’s not about the books, it’s about the company.” She went on to explain that members took turns suggesting books, and her turn would roll around again soon. In the meantime, she was willing to read books that weren’t necessarily her favorites because of the great respect she had for the other members of her book club. She trusted that if one of the terrific human beings in her book club chose the book, something about it was worthwhile, so she was willing to keep on reading and have her mind changed by the conversation. For Jane, the intellectual rewards of book clubs walk hand in hand with the social.

I’ve seen the same thing happen with adolescent readers who’ve chosen to stay together for more than one round of book club. As long as a book club is functioning well socially and staying on task, I tell them to go for it. Far be it from me to disrupt what’s working well with adolescent readers! When the group is ready for a new book, the members consider the available choices and make a selection by consensus.

A second difference between the book clubs I describe here and the literature circles described by Daniels is that he stresses that discussion topics in literature circles come only from students. This is mostly the case in book clubs as well, but the Book Club Discussion Records featured in Chapter 5 provide a good example of how teachers can also offer topics in order to maintain continuity among book clubs but still avoid dominating discussion.

The text clusters students read during book club segments in my classroom are usually related by theme, genre, or project. For instance, in a thematic unit on personal choice and social justice, tenth graders might choose from Catalyst, Holes, Monster, To Kill a Mockingbird, and Bless Me, Ultima. After recording and discussing their own topics and questions on a discussion record, students conclude the book club session by considering one question I’ve provided that is thematically relevant to all the books. This question reinforces important aspects of the unit or allows me to push the group’s thinking in ways they might not have considered, and it also ensures a common thread for all the book clubs. If class time permits after book clubs have concluded for a particular day, groups sometimes briefly report their answers to the common question to the rest of the class. Hearing what others have said extends discussion of the unit theme, familiarizes groups with one another’s books, and often generates interest in the books others are reading as well.
THEORETICAL FLEXIBILITY OF BOOK CLUBS Another aspect that distinguishes literature circles from book clubs stems less from logistics. By design, the literary theory informing literature circles is reader response theory (e.g., Rosenblatt 1938, 1978). Daniels (2002) explains that in literature circles, “the base for everything is ‘just reading’ and ‘just responding’ to lots and lots of books” (23). The featured response tool in doing so is the “role sheet,” though Daniels also discusses a handful of other tools. In preparation for literature circles, students take on different roles (e.g., connector, questioner, literary luminary, illustrator, etc.). These roles require students to employ various strategies proficient readers use and are delineated by open-ended prompts on their respective role sheets. For instance, the “connector” notes “connections [he] made between this reading and [his] own experiences, the wider world, and other texts or authors” (107). Students use these comments to channel book club discussions, and they rotate roles in the course of the literature circle.

Book clubs, too, draw on reader response theory in that they enable students to generate and share their personal responses to books, but again, the key feature of book clubs is flexibility. As you will see in the chapters that follow, book clubs draw on other literary theories in addition to reader response and emphasize a wider range of response tools than role sheets. This feature, probably more than any other, distinguishes book clubs from literature circles.

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING AND CURRICULAR FLEXIBILITY IN BOOK CLUBS Although the computer on which I’m writing suggests that cooperation and collaboration are synonyms, these words actually have different meanings when applied to small-group learning (Damon and Phelps 1989; John-Steiner 2000). Vera John-Steiner explains that “participants in cooperative endeavors each make specific contributions to a shared task. However, their level of involvement may differ, as well as their sense of intellectual ownership of the resulting product” (12). Literature circles provide a good example of cooperative learning in the way role sheets are designed to prompt students’ written response and discussion by “giving kids clearly defined, interlocking, and open-ended tasks” (13). In other words, each role is meant to constitute a different piece of an idealized reader’s cognitive puzzle. Thus, literature circles divide up the cognitive labor of reading, as each member takes up just one piece of the puzzle and fits it together with other members’ pieces to complete the reading experience. The goal is that by trying
every role on for size in the course of a literature circle, students will eventually internalize all of them.

One of the drawbacks of cooperative learning, however, is that while it completes the puzzle, the pieces don’t necessarily have to interact in the process. Rather, they can easily remain discrete parts of a whole. If I stick to my role and you stick to yours, we can still cooperate to complete the task without ever truly influencing one another. Daniels (2002) reports that the same can happen in literature circles when students misuse role sheets as ends in and of themselves. Literature circle discussions can devolve into mere reporting if “kids just go around the circle, reading their role sheets one after the other, and never get into a real conversation” (13). For that reason, Daniels emphasizes that role sheets ought to be temporary supports, and he suggests alternative methods for encouraging interaction in literature circles in the second edition of Literature Circles (see also Mini-Lessons for Literature Circles [2005], coauthored by Daniels and Nancy Steineke). Unfortunately, the literature circles I observe and hear secondary teachers describe often feature a steady diet of role sheets, even after several rounds.

Don’t get me wrong: If I’d have known that literature circles existed when I started using book clubs in my classroom, I’d no doubt have tried role sheets. The puzzle metaphor just seems so darn logical. Yet research based on think-aloud protocols, in which readers describe their reading processes while they’re reading, reveals that even experienced readers’ processes are by no means logical or linear (see, for instance, Wolf 1988). Rather, they are recursive, full of stops and starts and missteps as readers lunge forward and circle back, revising their initial interpretations as connections pop into their heads or new information comes along. Thus even the individual reader’s cognitive puzzle pieces are less discrete than logic might suggest. For instance, the reader doesn’t “define new words” first before “making personal connections” or “posing questions.” Rather, these processes mingle fluidly, influencing one another in unpredictable ways to produce interpretations that are provisional at best.

Book clubs, on the other hand, are based on a collaborative model for learning, the premise being that if processes within the individual reader are so dynamic, then we need to find similarly dynamic ways of encouraging interactions among readers. John-Steiner (2000) explains that collaborative learning is characterized by a “fully realized equality in roles and responsibilities” because participants “see themselves
engaged in a joint task” (13, emphasis mine). In book clubs, the joint task is to build an interpretation of a text together through exploratory acts of composing, including writing, visualizing, and speaking.

To develop the myriad habits of mind practiced by engaged readers, book clubs rely on curricular flexibility. Depending on readers’ needs and teachers’ instructional goals, students use a wide variety of response tools instead of relying on just one. While their individual responses do foster book club discussion, students aren’t confined to a single role. Book club discussions tend to be free-flowing as a result. My thought may end where yours begins, and because our roles aren’t hard-and-fast, you may make a connection or pose a question I hadn’t considered. I may in turn extend your idea toward a new conclusion so that both of our interpretations are stretched ever after.

Thus, while in literature circles, each member’s individual puzzle piece (i.e., role sheet) is still recognizable in the end product, in book clubs, ideas and functions mingle so completely that no one can take sole credit for the final outcome. Though each book club member clearly contributes, tracing an individual’s discrete contribution is almost as impossible as identifying the single shade of blue in an impressionistic painting. Further support for a collaborative approach is provided by the research conducted by Donna Alvermann and her colleagues (1996), who found that open-ended tasks that require group collaboration, as opposed to division of labor among individuals, are an essential component of effective discussion in small groups. Over time, then, the sum can become greater than the whole of its parts. In Chapters 4 and 5, I describe how to set book clubs up to support this kind of collaborative learning.

**Recognizing a Book Club If You Saw One**

So if you stepped into my classroom, how would you distinguish a book club from a reading group, a small-group discussion, or a literature circle? About once a week, you would see small groups of four to six students discussing topics of their choice drawn from books of their choice as the teacher browsed around the room among groups. Students wouldn’t take turns reading around the circle, but sometimes, in the midst of discussion, a student might flip through the book and read a passage aloud as she made a large point or reminded her peers of a significant event that occurred in the portion of the book they had read independently prior to book club.
Over time, you’d see that the membership in some book clubs remained the same while other kids switched from group to group depending on their reading preferences. You’d note the absence of teacher-prepared study questions and see that the response tools students used to prompt their conversations depended on the instructional purpose, student need, and/or featured literary theory at the time. In one book club, you might hear a student drawing attention to images from the Mind Map he drew for the narrator from Poe’s “The Telltale Heart.” Another day, you might see a student reading from her Real Books Letter about the personal connections she’d made to Cather’s *My Antonia*. In another book club, a student might refer to Internet research he’d conducted on censorship as the group discussed Lasky’s *Memoirs of a Bookbat*. And in yet another book club, you might see a student identifying race, class, and gender distinctions in a scene from Porter’s *Imani All Mine* as prompted by her Sticky Notes Bookmark.

You’d see collaborative conversation as opposed to cooperative reporting out, and someone would be keeping track of the conversation using a Book Club Discussion Record so that the group could reflect on their responses later and synthesize them in a culminating project after they had finished the book. In short, even though each group would be discussing a different book and the topics would obviously vary, even though the response tools might change from week to week, the conversation would be purposeful in that it would obviously reflect a system established in the larger context of the class and its curriculum.

**Justifying Book Clubs**

No one becomes an English teacher just to help students meet instructional standards and do well on high-stakes tests. Instead, we do so because we love to read and write, or because of an eighth-grade English teacher, or because we read *To Kill a Mockingbird* in tenth grade and have never been the same.

I can’t imagine a life without reading. As I look around the room where I am writing, every flat surface holds some kind of book. A thin novel and a book of essays lean against the stereo. A boxed set of picture books on the back of the piano serves as a pedestal for a framed quotation from Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*. A trio of Mary Oliver’s books rests on the end table, and my daughter’s bible and my son’s latest chapter book are stacked
on the stairway leading to their bedrooms. The history I just finished and
the memoir I’m working on are lying on the coffee table, and research
books and journals are stuffed behind its cabinet doors. It’s really not as
messy as it sounds. It’s just that books are fixtures in my family’s lives. I
want them to be so in the lives of adolescent readers as well.

We became English teachers because the words we read and write mat-
ter to us, and we want them to matter just as much to our students. Yet as
the demands of standards, curricula, and standardized tests press in, we have
to wonder what makes book clubs worth the time. For one thing, book
clubs acknowledge these constraints rather than ignore them, but they do
so by putting adolescent readers’ needs first. In the next chapter, I identify
these needs and describe how book clubs are designed to meet them.
Thank you for sampling this resource.

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