Laurie MacGillivray
Lucy Tse
Jeff McQuillan

Second language and literacy teachers considering literature circles: A play

This two-act play focuses on using literature discussions as a vehicle for literacy and language growth in secondary and college courses.

Characters

Laurie: An Anglo assistant professor at the University of Southern California. In her undergraduate and graduate reading classes, she stresses the importance of learning about oneself as a reader and the role of social interactions through the use of literature circles (book talks). She is a member of the informal pizza literature circle started last fall by students from a class who wanted to continue to gather with others to talk about a book everyone had read.

Jeff: An Irish American Ph.D. student and an instructor of university English as a Second Language and Spanish. He was introduced to literature circles when taking a course with Laurie and is also a member of the informal pizza literature circle. He has used literature circles in his intermediate Spanish classes.

Lucy: An Asian American Ph.D. student and an ESL instructor. She also became interested in literature circles when taking a course with Laurie and is a member of the same book group as Jeff and Laurie. She is considering using literature circles in her ESL courses.

Setting: A cool July Sunday morning in Los Angeles. A small coffee shop with good French toast, large coffee mugs and free refills, and rickety but comfortable wood and straw chairs.

Act I—Personal experiences with literature circles

Scene 1— Participant benefits

Laurie: I realized the other day that we are all involved with book talks in multiple ways. There seem to be so many issues surrounding their role both in our lives and in our classes that I wanted us to spend some time talking about what we know and what we are still wondering about. Thanks for getting together. First, are we all working with the same definition?

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Jeff: I would define literature circles as self-selected discussion groups that center on a commonly read story, article, or book. "Self-selected" here refers to both the work discussed and the members of the circle.

Laurie: Great, that is what I mean too. Now, where should we start?

Lucy: Let's talk about what we feel are the benefits for ourselves as participants.

Jeff: I can start with an obvious one for me. Before being in a lit circle in your class, Laurie, it had been an embarrassingly long time since I had read any fiction at all. My impressions of the circle were that—and this was commented upon by many others in my circle—the experience reintroduced me to the reading of literature. This point stands out as primary.

Lucy: It had also been a long time since I had read for pleasure, probably about a year. The nice thing about being in a lit circle is that I can read for pleasure without guilt, that is, without feeling that I should be doing more important things.

Jeff: What next struck me was the sudden shock of hearing other voices and critiques about things I was used to thinking about alone. Other than movies, I don't remember discussing anything longer than a commonly read magazine article with friends. I do remember mentioning books to friends (like, "You mean you *didn't* like *House on Mango Street*? How could you *not*!"), but it was always at that sound-bite level.

Laurie: Hearing other voices and approaches to reading also strikes me as a real benefit of lit circles. I have a friend who thinks about books in a way that is completely foreign to me. He can recall specific scenes years after reading a book. He weaves them into his life. Books have offered him comfort, escape, and ideas about the potentiality of life in a way I had never felt before. Even though I didn't realize it until joining a circle, I learn a lot about the various ways people relate to texts and even their reading strategies. In contrast, one student told me that she didn't like circles because she always "understood" the short stories. It struck me that she didn't see them as a time to learn about how others interacted with texts.

Lucy: Your class, Laurie, was one of the few times that I felt empowered, and by that I mean I felt I had a true voice in decision making. I've been in classes where instructors paid lip service to "learner-centered" pedagogy, but in the end intervened to get the final say. Once we got into the literature circles, we had ownership. We knew the lit circle was purely for our enjoyment and we weren't being evaluated. We did evaluate the experience for ourselves and Laurie at the end of the semester, but that reinforced, rather than contradicted, our sense of ownership. I think that our high level of investment made it easier for the members to open up to each other. When we spoke about stories, my group members tended to personalize themes, either by relating the story to their own life experiences or by discussing how the story made them feel. This personalization brought the group closer together. We had a responsibility to make the experience comfortable and worthwhile for each other.

Laurie: Like both of you, my first experience, even though it had an academic blend—I guess like y'all's—hooked me. I love relating to people around, through, about books. Maybe because I like to break social rules, talk about the untalked about, and books allow that—for me. They are just enough of an excuse to allow me to think differently about acceptable topics. But I don't think this is the case for everyone. And others might be extremely uncomfortable with it. My friend and I read aloud to each other and have long discussions. I find this so satisfying. We learn different aspects about each other that might not have come up for years, if ever, unless we were reading a book. For example, we read a book on Vietnam and he talked more explicitly than he had before about what his experiences were like. And our talk on that topic has continued. The book created, let's say, a connecting strand that has lasted, rather than only occurring during the reading. Ah, we finished the book but not the conversation.

Scene 2—Personalities in groups

Jeff: Having been in a number of different circles now, I have come to the conclusion that the group's "who" is more important than its "what"; that is, the

composition of the group matters more than the book itself. Has anyone else sensed this?

Laurie: The participants of a lit circle make all the difference in whether I get anything out of it. I don't want to talk about literature with people I don't like. Maybe I'm impatient or my expectations are too high, but I want folks to really share personal insights and feed off each other's ideas. When someone hogs the conversation—in my eyes—or repeats ideas continually, I shut down. Differences in opinion make for interesting talk, so it is not important that we are all alike, but there should be some chemistry.

Lucy: We developed a lot of trust in my first lit circle. Perhaps some of that trust was implicit—we were all women from similar perspectives and there were only three of us in the group. We all seemed to like each other. It's very clear from the two experiences I've had as participant that, for me, gender makeup of the group makes a big difference in my willingness to share personal reactions and experiences. Certainly it's not the only factor, but it's a big one, along with many other perceived similarities with other group members that make communication easier. What about your class, Jeff? I know that it was much larger and had more of a cultural mix.

Jeff: I was the only native speaker in my first literature circle, and although I sometimes acted as the linguistic expert in my group, I was never the interpretive one. I would often take a leadership role, shared by the three other most confident speakers. Not that I am averse to wanting the spotlight, but this actually made me pull back a little so as not to dominate the discussion. It seemed to me that the less proficient or confident second language speakers held back and got steamrollered at times when things got hot.

Laurie: When I organized study groups to read professional literature and discuss teaching issues, I became very aware that I wanted people whom I liked. If it was going to work, there needed to be a trust level and mutual commitment. This is a little different from literature discussions, but I see a similar need.

Scene 3—Group formation

Laurie: In teacher study groups, we were grouped by our common purpose, such as learning more about process writing. This mutual purpose created some form to the issue of who should participate. I am still trying to figure out how to allow book groups to form more naturally in my classes.

Lucy: Our class grouped by default, according to the anthology of short stories we had chosen to read from. Although Laurie said that it wasn't necessary for all members of the group to be reading the same stories, we thought that that was the easiest way to go about it. I feel I got lucky because I ended up with folks I liked and got along with. But that was all luck. I didn't know them very well beforehand and I felt like we needed a little more time to get acquainted, maybe a feeling that can never be satisfied no matter how much time is given.

Jeff: In my first experience with lit circles, I just invited all of the people who were in the center of the room to join my group—in this case, the less confident second language speakers. I also think it's important that enough time be given to students to get to know the other members of the class. It was only during the last half of the semester that I got to know who was good for my circle.

Lucy: I've been wondering how often we should change groups. I haven't enjoyed our informal pizza lit circles as much in recent months. I think that I'm having trouble adjusting to a new mix of people every time since participants are free to come and go. I find that I need a certain amount of time to get used to people in the group and I go through a silent period during which I feel them out.

Laurie: I have noticed your quietness and actually missed your talk in recent circles. Although my first response to your question is that strangers would not affect me in the same way, I realize that I have known all the people that have joined the literature circle. So, I don't really know how I would feel.

Jeff: I don't think there is any one measure, such as familiarity, to tell us how often to change the membership of the group, or how long it takes for people to get comfortable with one another. I know some of the people in our present group quite well and frankly wish they would manage to miss a few meetings. My own sense is that adding new mem-

bers slowly and by mutual consent would strike a nice balance between familiarity and freshness.

Laurie: It gets tricky, doesn't it? Can you imagine asking newcomers to leave the room so we could vote on them? Anyway, what has bothered me was the way I have resented, at times, reading for our literature gatherings. Especially when I am in the middle of another novel, reading for the circle can feel like an assignment. I guess I want this to always feel pleasurable. How have you two felt?

Lucy: Although, as I mentioned before, I appreciate having the excuse to read for lit circle, I sometimes feel that it's yet another assignment, especially if it's a book that I'm not particularly drawn to.

Jeff: I agree with both of you, adding that in the case of our pizza lit circle, I think it's okay for members to reserve the right to pass on a given meeting when the book doesn't particularly interest them or they don't have the time. After all, this is about enjoying books, not adding to our stress level.

Act II—Teaching issues

Scene 1—Benefits for students

Lucy: We all talked about the benefits we experienced as members of literature circles. What do you consider to be the benefits for your students? In other words, what is the purpose?

Jeff: I'll take a crack at that. I see lit circles in the second language or L2 context as a type of pleasure reading, which is one of the best ways to promote language development. This, of course, begs the question of why we learn languages. Ultimately, it is to make links to other people. Relating to others is the goal of language, and making connections is the essence of literature circles.

Lucy: I see lit circles for L2 learners as a way to learn language and I agree with Jeff that language learning is ultimately a way to make contact and build relationships with the people around you. I also see it as a way for the students to begin seeing their L2 reading in a new light. Most of the L2 students I've encountered have never read a book in English, and certainly not for pleasure. In fact, many view reading in English with apprehension if not fear. Even students who enjoy reading in their first language don't see the connection between reading for pleasure in their L1 and L2. For them, reading in the L2 will always be equated with study. As we've all mentioned, lit circles are a way to be reintroduced and to get hooked on discussing books with others. If lit circles can have these effects for folks participating in their L1, it's reasonable to think that L2 readers could have similar experiences. I don't expect the students to have overwhelmingly positive reactions the first time out, but if students could overcome some of their reluctance and see that reading in English can be enjoyable, then that's a great achievement in itself.

Laurie: I found Jeff's comment that the point of learning another language is to "make links to other people" interesting. I would also say this is one of my goals as a literacy instructor. I think talking about books with others is about learning to better understand ourselves. Lucy, your point about the benefit of encouraging second language users, I would tie to this. I want students to learn the wonders of reading—in other words I want to make readers at all ages—because I see it as a way to make sense of the world and learn about oneself. I expect my students to learn more about themselves and the world along with developing their ability to teach reading by expanding their explicit sense of possible strategies for how to read for different occasions, texts, and purposes.

Jeff: I think it's also interesting to note that literature circles also solve a lot of the traditional problems that second language teachers have in multilevel classrooms. Students at various levels of proficiency can mix and match according to interest, helping each other and grouping with others of like fluency. From my use of lit circles in Spanish classes, I know that the circles have essentially replaced the textbooks as forms of input in the language. Not only is everything covered in the reading of stories and articles—grammar, vocabulary, discourse forms, idioms, and so forth—but it is done in a highly comprehensible and interesting way. I would think the same would be true in a first language classroom.

Laurie: In literacy classes, I also found book talks to include many of the elements which teachers often feel mandated to teach. Students of all ages—

my experience ranges from first graders to graduate students—construct a plot summary, analyze characters, and so forth. When I wanted my undergraduates to begin analyzing gender, race, and cultural assumptions in picture storybooks, I simply read a book to them and led a discussion about these issues. The book circles continued the themes naturally while discussing their own literature.

Lucy: With students from many different language backgrounds and experiences, anticipating the type of help that all of them need is nearly impossible and certainly impractical. The advantage of lit circles is that language issues emerge naturally as students try to make sense of the stories and books they read. Allowing students to choose the types of texts brings into the classroom genres that may not normally be included and exposes students to a wider sampling of language than in more narrowly focused courses.

Jeff: It may be warranted to mention a word about students reading a book in their second language and discussing it in their first. This is "doable" in many foreign language classes and a few homogeneous ESL classes. I have no objections to it, as students are getting lots of comprehensible language from the texts themselves. Since their production in the L2 will always lag their reception, students may like the option when possible of such a combination approach. Of course, a mix of first languages would necessitate the use of the common L2, and advanced students may prefer to speak in their new language. Teachers need to be flexible here, I think, and let the composition of their classes dictate the medium of discussion.

Scene 2—Expectations of students

Jeff: We have talked about what *we* expect; what do you think the *students* expect from literature circles?

Lucy: I have been wrestling with that exact issue. If students are familiar with a concept, like doing grammar exercises, then any amount of difficulty is considered legitimate. If it's a new concept, like discussing emotional responses to texts, then it's not comfortable, not legitimate; especially if it is viewed as easy. My language students expect traditional language instruction. So, I've been working on making reading discussions a legitimate activity in their eyes because they don't expect reading and talking about books to develop their English. Also, many are not comfortable with the choices they are asked to make in class, including selecting texts and setting reading schedules. One semester I assigned books for the class to read, rather than allowing students to choose. I had two students repeating the course from the previous semester and they both said they preferred the second semester, precisely because there was less choice.

Laurie: Interestingly, the expectation is often that class must be painful, unrelated to real life in order to prove its academic worth. But I realize that when I ask students to talk about real life and then listen in to their talk, it can feel like pressure. It can even feel intrusive.

Jeff: I tried to be very sensitive in respecting the privacy of each circle's talk by not listening in to their discussions unless requested to do so, for example, to help with unfamiliar phrases or references. I would often simply read a magazine or leave the room to get a drink of water and let the students have their time to talk.

Laurie: I wonder if I should have tried that. I wanted to model for my students the role teachers can play in their students' talk. I guess I am uncomfortable with the idea of letting the groups go. The teacher needs to be around to nudge and listen in, so she or he can learn about the students and their reading processes. However, the one time I sat at my desk and pretended to be busy with paperwork in my undergraduate class, one student said he felt like I finally trusted them. I had expected them to say in the debriefing that they felt ignored, because I wasn't paying enough attention to the individual groups. Now, I am not sure what to do. When I am not sure about something, I often find talking about it with the class seems to work. So this fall, I will talk with the students about what role they want me to play in their literature circles and the pros and cons of different kinds of teacher interaction.

Scene 3—Parameters of talk

Lucy: What would you consider appropriate parameters for talk during literature discussions?

Jeff: I would keep it very broad and personal: Talk about some things you liked or disliked, did this remind you of any other stories or real life experiences, and so forth. For second language students, it may be a matter of clarifying language not understood. I noticed that many times the conversations would veer off into talk about other classes or pop culture, but I considered this part of the process. Students have very little chance to talk in school, including the university, unless it is with close friends. Oddly, the lit circle gave them a pretext to get to know their fellow students. This is good, and it also relates well to liking the friendly chatter of what books are about. Maybe I am blurring the line too much, but I think my own lit circles are often artificially constrained by the pull of the book. At times I'd rather go off in other directions, to such an extent that the lit circle ceases to be that. Is this good?

Laurie: I talked with my students—I do think it is different in leisure talks—about book talk. I think using a book to jump off onto a deep issue that would not normally be discussed is appropriate. Clearly, there is a judgment I am making. We talk in class about where this imaginary differentiation falls. For example, does discussing the fall schedule cut it? Not for me. Talking about overpowering mothers? Yes. We also talk about a shared group responsibility to guide talk back when it veers. It is not fair that one person becomes the teacher, which others in the group often love because they don't have to. With my undergrads especially, there are awkward silences in the beginning. I think the book must create some sort of boundaries for talk in order for it to be a book talk. And although, like you, Jeff, in discussions I sometimes feel constricted by the book, I am usually most satisfied at the end of circles when we have really mucked around in the text. So with the harder books (more controversial topics or multiple perspectives), I like the assumption that we should push through on a book.

Jeff: While I agree with you, Laurie, that literature circles are primarily about books, and are most satisfying when centered on them, I am still not ready to limit talk about, say, the movie I saw last night, even if some think the connection is tenuous. The book sets initial boundaries, but I would let students set the ultimate ones. By the way, I think the silence at the beginning of the initial lit circles is common, and we should warn teachers to expect silent periods when students are getting to know both each other and the process.

Laurie: I have noticed that over the year of our informal literature circles meeting, the talk has evolved. Whereas I used to feel uncomfortable and unsatisfied when our talk wandered, now our meanderings (for lack of a better word) seem to actually make the entire circle richer. I think, even though some folks have come and gone, a trust has developed and we feel safer allowing the book to be a rich stimulus for conversation. For example, last month we talked about race relations and slavery in a very honest way, the kind of talk I can't imagine happening without the shared reading to bring it forth.

Scene 4—Grading

Jeff: Any use of literature circles in the classroom must deal with the question of evaluation. For me, it is key that teachers build trust with their students, just as students do with each other. It seems to me that having teachers grade students on literature circles, making them be accountable or produce a product—all fashionable nowadays—would kill the thing cold.

Laurie: I agree in part, Jeff. I'm still wrestling with this. The system I liked most I developed when teaching first grade. I had a series of 1 to 5 scales on which I rated the students. There were six or seven, so a low score on one wouldn't wipe a kid out. Also, I was pressured to have grades reflect reading ability so these reflected both ability and tenacity. None of the scales reflected one-shot interactions like tests. For example, I rated the kids on reading perseverance. This measure simply reflected how often a kid engaged in sustained interactions with a text. In my undergraduate class, the students rated themselves on attendance and preparedness and small group participation. In fact, I had some good talkers who would participate a lot, but had not read. I'd like to diversify my grading in the graduate reading class. I can see the class creating its own continuums and then self-grading. With an al-

lowance for written responses to supplement the verbal interactions, I would think this system could be pretty sensitive to students.

Jeff: The grading thing is all a bit depressing from my point of view, but it is part of the system. I think your scheme of multipoint grading, Laurie, is good in that students have input and there is no high-stakes testing, but I prefer not to have to delve into Byzantine schemes to be sensitive to student needs if the result is obfuscation of the central issue: Grading means "I don't trust you to learn!" I also had my college students set up their own evaluation committee and they chose a combination of peer evaluation, 50%, and self-evaluation, 50%. I respected their decisions. I can't see expending too much energy worrying that someone gets an A in the lit circle but doesn't say a word. If this decreases the "face validity" of my class in the eyes of students, then I have just succeeded in questioning their own notions of evaluation, trust, and learning.

Lucy: I don't know what to say about grading. For the first time, I experimented with having my students evaluate their own language levels and to make recommendations to me about their level placement. I've always seen grades as encouraging forces and have given high grades as a result, to the dismay of my boss, who wants "tough grading."

Laurie: Jeff, your clear stance on the unimportance of grading irks me. Maybe because I am jealous of your stance. Or maybe I'm too aware of the role of grades in the larger scheme of things.

Jeff: No matter what teachers do with evaluation, I think all three of us can all agree that literature circles are *not* about comprehension questions or quizzes on a book's plot and theme. Teachers must ultimately decide for themselves how to handle grading, always recognizing that the key to a circle's success is a reader's interaction with the text and with other students.

Scene 5—So what's it all mean?

Laurie: I'm staring at my coffee grounds, content with my breakfast and further along in my thinking about book discussions. Where are y'all and what would you recommend to teachers just considering them as a part of their classes?

Lucy: I've been considering using lit circles in my ESL classes but have been apprehensive. My hesitation was in not knowing exactly how to implement them and how they would play out in the ESL classroom. Hearing about your experiences, I've gained insight into setting up classroom lit circles and about the issues that need to be addressed by each teacher and participant. What has struck me in our conversations is that trust is really the central ingredient in creating successful experiences. Stepping back and having faith in students to plan, decide, and adjust as needed are essential if they are to have ownership of their learning experiences and to have meaningful talks. As I am discovering as a teacher, beginning to share power and responsibility in the classroom is one of the most difficult steps to take.

Laurie: I realized during our interactions that the best decisions I have made about literature circles for my students have come from my experiences as a participant. I would recommend that teachers who want to try book discussions in their classrooms organize their own literature circles [for tips on forming teacher book clubs, see Flood & Lapp, 1994]. Reading short stories rather than novels can lighten the time load and the time is well spent. I want to be clearer about what I expect my students to get from participating in literature circles. Because time is so valuable for the many reasons we discussed, students need to hear some of the ways I imagine them benefiting. I think this will help move them beyond trying to ask and answer comprehension questions. They may not even consider sharing how they go about reading unless I mention this sometimes. I am still not sure about what I want my role to be during the circles, but I feel good about simply sharing my thoughts with the students.

Jeff: This conversation for me has been much like my lit circles, in that I now view things in a different way. For example, the gender and empowerment issues that both of you raised are ones I hadn't considered, and I now see a need to talk about them explicitly with my students. Our talk today also convinced me that any classroom, from kindergarten to university, whether in a first or sec-

ond language setting, can benefit from literature circles. I think teachers should consider the fundamental power of readers interacting with each other through a text that they've selected. For many, it will be the first experience with such an interaction, and the benefits that come from this—that sense of empowerment, the development of literacy and language, the explorations of self and relationships, and above all the negotiation of meaning—will be exciting and renovating. My advice to the teacher first using lit circles is this: Experiment, fool around with it, try short texts, try long texts, listen in, don't listen in, let students explore and sample different styles and arrangements. And as you suggested, Laurie, participate in a circle yourself. Only then can you see what we've discovered in our circles—and in this conversation—that the exchange of ideas deepens both understanding and the curiosity to know and read more.

Epilogue

Since this is an unusual format for a professional article, we thought readers might like to know more about the creation process. The three of us came together in the summer of 1994 to consider writing an article on literature circles. We knew each other in various roles as related to book talks. Each of us believed in the power of social interactions around books to benefit learners both in literacy and in language.

When we met early in the summer, we talked about what we felt we had to say about using book talks as a component of language and literacy classes. Neither Lucy nor Jeff were aware of any work discussing the use of literature circles as a part of adult second language instruction although the use of self-selected individual reading has been advocated by a few researchers (Elley, 1991; Krashen, 1993). Laurie was mostly familiar with the writing on literature circles in elementary classrooms (Harste, Burke, & Short, 1986; McGee, 1992; Short, 1992; Short & Pierce, 1990) and nonacademic adult circles (Smith, 1993). We decided to come together and try to figure out what we believed we had learned as participants and teachers, and what we were still wondering about. Because we had all interacted by electronic mail frequently, this medium seemed convenient. Moreover, we liked how it reflected the conversational style of literature circles. After 5 weeks and 15 exchanges, Jeff suggested we get together and talk face to face. Laurie and Lucy agreed.

Our next step was to decide on an appropriate format and the key themes that we felt were evident in our communications to each other. A play format seemed appealing since it was yet another way to reflect the complexity and nonlinearity of literature circles. We were not interested in amalgamating our separate voices into one (false) authoritative voice. Actually, our original goal was to begin a conversation with literacy and language teachers about the possibilities of literature circles as a teaching tool. This genre would allow us to stay true to our goal and keep the multiplicity of our e-mail interactions. Next, we decided on the details of the play format and each assumed responsibility for assembling the e-mail exchanges into sections of the play. It was completed after several more rounds on e-mail and feedback from helpful peers and reviewers.

We hope readers enjoyed the play format and actually learned about the benefit of literature talk for students and teachers alike. As previously mentioned, it allowed us to share our different opinions and to "talk" more realistically about literature circles. Finally, we hope that journals continue to support teacher researchers in their quest to present and share knowledge in voices that resonate reality.

MacGillivray teaches in the School of Education at the University of Southern California (WPH #1003, *School of Education, University of Southern California*, Los Angeles, CA 90089-0031, USA). *Tse and McQuillan both teach in the American Language Institute of the same university.*

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