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Becoming well-read or reading well? Academic Reading Circles as an innovative and inclusive practice

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Abstract

Academic Reading Circles are an innovative strategy for supporting students' academic reading practices. Based on reading circles used in more general contexts to develop students' engagement with reading extensively, Academic Reading Circles have been adapted to the academic context to help students engage with more complex texts in their discipline. This paper will consider how Academic Reading Circles can play a strategic role in students becoming well read or in their learning process of reading well. The authors will use their experiences of embedding Academic Reading Circles in their teaching within different disciplines (in the Arts/Humanities and Social Sciences) to explore how Academic Reading Circles can guide learners to develop a critical lens through which to examine denser academic texts, and encourage them to recognise and make the most of the multidimensionality of the reading experience.

Keywords: reading circles, academic reading, inclusive practice, criticality

What are Academic Reading Circles?

Academic Reading Circles emerged in the 2010s (Seburn, 2015) from collaborative reading practices such as book clubs and literature circles (Daniels 2002), which have been adapted to English language teaching (Furr, 2004; Shelton-Strong, 2012) and content-based teaching (Williams, 2007). In essence, what these approaches have in common is that they aim to develop a range of reading skills, i.e., decoding, fluency, comprehension and monitoring, by 1) encouraging learner autonomy and 2) providing carefully scaffolded reading support. The autonomy is achieved by tutors

creating the right learning environment for small, free-flowing, peer-led discussion groups of learners to read a (section of a) text and share their interpretations.

Learner autonomy and collaboration are central to reading circles, and these are prominent in the 11 principles underpinning the original practice of Literature Circles, outlined by Harvey Daniels (2002, p.18):

1. Students choose their own reading materials.

2. Small temporary groups are formed based on book choice.

3. Different groups read different books.

4. Groups meet on a regular, predictable schedule to discuss their reading.

5. Students use written or drawn notes to guide both their reading and discussion.

6. Discussion topics come from students.

7. Discussion meetings aim to be open, natural conversations about books, so personal connections, digressions, and open-ended questions are welcome.

8. The teacher serves as a facilitator, not a group member or instructor.

9. Evaluation is by teacher observation and student self-evaluation.

10. A spirit of playfulness and fun pervades the room.

11. When books are finished, readers share with their classmates and then new groups form around new reading choices.

In the fields of language teaching, content-based provision and English for Academic Purposes (EAP), however, reading circles have been used with varying degrees of learner autonomy, especially when it comes to choice of text/genre of text, group make-up or follow-up activities. Practitioners have highlighted the potential for more tutor intervention when considering the appropriacy of the reading text(s) vis-à-vis learners' language and content needs (Furr, 2004; Shelton-Strong, 2012; Seburn, 2015), reading circles membership and its impact on learner motivation (Furr, 2004), as well as the range of follow-up reading, speaking, writing or feedback activities and their link to the learners' academic development and performance (Gore-Loyd, 2015; Schoonmaker, 2014; Seburn, 2015). Nonetheless, reading circles have been seen as "democratic" and enabling spaces (Williams, 2007, p.42) that allow for

contributions from each member at a pace, level of complexity and depth of engagement that they are comfortable with.

In terms of the degree of tutor participation in reading circles, it is most prominent in the support provided in the preparatory stage, although facilitating discussions and follow-up activities is also important. The reading support, which usually involves role assignment, scaffolds learners' communicative competence by providing them with an interpretative lens through which to approach the text and shape their contributions in the peer-led discussion. The number and scope of possible roles vary among practitioners; however, as can be seen in *Table 1*, the range used in literature circles (LCs), content-based reading circles (CBRCs) and academic reading circles (ARCs) covers the full spectrum of reading skills, i.e., decoding/ bottom-up linguistic processing (e.g., "Word wizard", "Literary luminary"/"Highlighter"), global text comprehension/ top-down interpretation (e.g., "Discussion leader", "Summariser"), and ability to integrate text(s) into existing knowledge (e.g., "Connector", "Investigator"/"Contextualiser"). Moreover, irrespective of which roles are selected for a reading circle, it is worth noting that they should address the key cognitive and metacognitive processes involved in reading comprehension and monitoring as outlined in Palinscar and Brown's reciprocal reading model (1984), i.e., summarising, clarifying, questioning and predicting. In this way, reading circles not only aim to enhance learners' reading comprehension, but also develop metacognitive strategies that can help overcome comprehension failures, improve retention and support long-term study.

"Insert Table 1 here"

Our experience of Academic Reading Circles

We have used Seburn's adaptation of ARCs in foundation (FY), undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate (PGT) programmes which prepare students for academic study in Arts and Humanities and Social Sciences. As these pre-sessional and in-sessional programmes are often based on content which has been carefully chosen to develop students' language and academic literacy skills in a specific discipline, the texts we use for the ARCs tend to be chosen by us rather than by the students, for the reasons also mentioned above. For example, in a FY course a general interest text is chosen that has cross-disciplinary appeal, such as mega-events, as using texts and genres that learners are familiar with or feel more comfortable with can be an easier way in for them before moving to more complex and denser academic texts (Seburn, 2015; TESL Ontario, 2016). Whereas at UG and PGT levels, texts tend to be from the core reading list so that students can be helped to engage with discipline-specific threshold concepts (Meyer and Land, 2003) and co-construct 'theory knowledgeability' (Cowley-Hasleden, 2020).

Finding the right balance between learner autonomy and tutor support is vital, we have discovered, as highlighted in the original principles by Daniels (2002). Students are introduced to ARCs early on in our courses and roles are assigned by the tutor with the aim of students having the opportunity to practise a different role with each text. Students are then given a few days to read the text and prepare the role tasks (see *Table 1*) before participating in the ARC in class, either face to face or online using MS Teams, for example. This can often include assigning time in class before the ARC discussion for students in the same role to share notes and check their understanding of the role requirements. Tutors typically take on a facilitator role, allowing the ARCs to run simultaneously but monitoring and intervening where necessary to aid discussion. On our PGT courses, the last ARC is handed over to students to run independently with the aim of encouraging them to use this as a self-study strategy on their Masters. On an in-sessional programme which offers academic support for students in the School of Sociology, we have experimented with two different approaches. One is where ARCs are set up by the EAP tutor for students on a core module to run independently. This more embedded approach is followed up in seminars through extension activities such as completing concept maps or reading logs. The other approach is where ARCS are handed over to

students to set up themselves outside class if they want. In this more student-led format students are shown a demonstration ARC recorded by the EAP tutor and volunteer students who are familiar with ARCS (typically from their pre-sessional course). Volunteer student leaders then invite others to sign up, organise the time and place to host the ARCs as well as suggest a core reading. There are no explicit follow-up or extension activities to this type of ARC but students treat it as a practice for discussion in their seminars.

To enhance engagement and demonstrate the social nature of reading practices (Baker *et al.*, 2019), we have also implemented the following:

- give students a choice of text from core or further reading lists;
- model ARC activities and provide checklists for challenging ARC roles (Seburn, 2015);
- allow for the personalisation of ARC roles to students' own needs, assignments or learning;
- explicitly connect reading to assignments and / or students' research (Gore-Lloyd, 2015);
- follow up ARC discussions with closely integrated tasks such as group presentations on reading and reflection, sharing annotated texts (Schoonmaker, 2014) and summary writing (Schmidt, 2015).

The fact that students who had been introduced to ARCs on the pre-sessional were keen to continue using them and set them up autonomously during their Masters suggests that they understood the relevance of ARCs to their studies and were motivated by the benefits of this embedded social practice (Wingate, 2015). Enabling safe supportive spaces for collaborative reading also promotes learner autonomy, trust, empathy, communication and problem-solving skills (McCollum *et al.*, 2017; Yapp *et al.*, 2021).

Strategies to deal with some of the challenges presented by ARCs

To enhance the inclusivity of ARCs, it might be useful to consider the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) guidelines developed by the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST, 2020). As with any area of inclusivity, providing diverse and flexible means of engaging with knowledge so that as many learners can participate

in the teaching and learning activities is a core principle with ARCs as well. In *Table 2* below, the main UDL guidelines are grouped in three categories, which in turn are mapped onto ARC-related activities as follows: 1) knowledge representation which will be reflected in the selection of appropriate, accessible and relevant ARC reading texts; 2) knowledge expression which will be reflected in a range of flexible, accessible and scaffolded to ARC activities; and 3) engagement with knowledge which will be reflected in the availability of contextualised and accessible instructional support and scaffolding.

<div align="center">"Insert Table 2 here"</div>

In terms of means of representation and expression, it might be useful to consider a range of formats of the reading text (e.g., mp3 files) and flexibility in the output of roles such as the "Visualiser" (e.g., using Lego builds, diagrams, or scrolls). The former will allow learners with SpLDs, users of screen readers, or those with caring commitments to engage with a reading text without the print medium/page or screen being an obstacle; whereas the latter will enable students with different learning styles or those struggling with different levels of motor control to take on the "Visualiser" role.

Other than the medium, the length, complexity and cultural situatedness of a reading text might be a barrier for some learners. To accommodate a range of needs, it might be useful to consider "slow" timing and embedding extensive reading (Rhead, 2019; Soliman, 2012), or negotiating the length of required reading (Shelton-Strong, 2012), so that learners can engage critically and holistically with reading texts without feeling the pressure to process it cognitively within a tight timeframe. Alternatively, given timetable constraints, it might be a better option to break down the reading text into shorter sections with guiding questions provided in advance (Seburn, 2015), use jigsaw reading activities or text maps/scrolls (Abegglen *et al.*, 2020) to support learners into reconstructing the whole reading text together.

A major factor affecting engagement is learners' perception of the ARC relevance to their studies. Thus, giving learners the freedom to choose a reading text, self-nominate for a role, or personalise reading roles to their own needs can improve learner motivation and promote ownership and monitoring of own learning. Daniels (2002) and Shelton-Strong (2012) have suggested that adherence to reading roles

guidance might sometimes lead to unnatural peer-led discussions, lacking flow and spontaneous interaction, hence they've recommended the use of reading logs instead. To signal the link between academic reading texts and real-world tasks/problems beyond the instrumentality of academia (Allen, 2011), use of perspective-taking activities such as Eduard de Bono's "thinking hats" (1971) to scaffold the "Discussion leader" questions might be useful. In terms of roles, it is also important to recognise that some might be underutilised, misunderstood or less relevant in different disciplines; for instance, the "Highlighter" in STEM or the "Visualiser" in Medicine and Healthcare might require additional guidance; alternatively, merging roles such as the "Connector" and the "Contextualiser" in certain contexts (e.g., when students have limited prior knowledge of the subject) might be appropriate (Williams, 2007).

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated the use and adaptability of Academic Reading Circles as an innovative and inclusive reading practice in developing students' criticality. By offering flexibility of form and means and removing metacognitive and socialisation barriers to learning, teachers can adapt the reading text and their delivery of this in order to support students in creative ways of analysing and interpreting content. As a result, students are given agency in taking ownership of their learning and building an understanding of how knowledge is co-constructed.

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Table 1. Role descriptions: Literature Circles (LC), Content-based Reading Circles (CBRC) and Academic Reading Circles (ARC)

Cognitive/Metacognitive processes (Palinscar and Brown, 1984) – Role descriptions	Daniels (2002) – LC	Furr (2004) – LC	Williams (2007) – CBRC	Seburn (2015) – ARC
Questioning, predicting - Ask (comprehension, critical, follow-up) questions about the text. - Manage the discussion.	Questioner	Discussion leader	Discussion leader	Discussion leader
Summarising - Summarise key points about the text and identify key message. - Comment on the overall structure.	Summariser	Summariser	Summariser	
Summarising - Represent the text in a different medium (e.g., create own visual, find an image). - Make the information more memorable.	Illustrator	Artistic adventurer		Visualiser
Clarifying, predicting - Identify key or new terms, important discourse markers. - Categorise and contextualise key vocabulary. - Explain/find synonyms or collocations of key vocabulary.	Word wizard	Word master	Word master	Highlighter
Clarifying, predicting - Identify key (puzzling, exciting, moving) passages to discuss with the group. - Explain reasons for choice. - Explain or elicit meaning.	Literary luminary	Passage person		
Clarifying, predicting, questioning - Find connections between the text and real-world experiences (own or others'). - Prepare questions for others to invite for such comments.	Connector	Connector	Culture connector	Connector
Clarifying, predicting, questioning - Find background information that helps understand the text better (e.g., info about author, context, period). - Research the information/evidence provided (e.g., bias, reliability, validity). - Find connections between text and other texts read, or learning done.	Investigator	Cultural collector		Contextualiser
Summarising - Present key comments/observations of the reading circle discussion.			Group representative	

Table 2. Inclusivity questions for Academic Reading Circles

UDL guidelines	Questions to consider for ARCs
Provide multiple means of **representation of knowledge**	- Can the text be represented in other formats, e.g., graphics, audio, tactile? - How manageable is the length of the text? - Could an organisational map of the text be provided to facilitate memory work and processing? - Are cultural references/humour in the reading text glossed? - Has the right reading environment been created? - Are instructions to the reading task clear and easy to follow?
Provide multiple means of **expressions of knowledge**	- Are learners free to communicate their knowledge/ideas in a format of their choice? - Are learners supported in how to use this format (e.g., assistive technologies)? - Have roles been assigned to learners, especially if they struggle with this? - Have ground rules (for group work and communication) been established?
Provide multiple means of **engagement with knnowledge**	- Are learners aware of the rationale for this reading task? - Are learners given choice of text or role? - Are learners given the option to personalise / adapt the reading task? - Are learners given appropriate support and feedback while performing the task?

Adapted from CAST. 2020. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) guidelines.