

## Talking books: Gender and the responses of adolescents in literature circles

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*ABSTRACT: The use of student-led discussions, or literature circles, offers the potential to engage all students through a more democratic, dialogic approach. The central goal of this research was to understand how adolescents practise literacy within the context of a peer, reading group, and how gender impacts these practices. Transcripts of student-led discussions were analyzed to determine how gender positioning impacted the group dynamics in literature circles; how students utilized literary theories, particularly gender theories, when in literature circles; and how the meanings constructed in literature circles challenged or reinforced traditional discourses of gender. Findings from two diverse focal groups suggested that there was a congruence between how the students discussed and what they discussed. While the dialogic structure opened space for critical readings of the text-worlds in certain instances, there was also evidence of asymmetrical power relations within groups, and corresponding resistance by some of the boys to more critical conversations, particularly about femininity.*

*KEYWORDS: Peer-led discussion, literature circles, reader response, gender studies, critical theory.*

In schools, in current educational research, and increasingly in the popular media, the literacy education of boys has become an important social issue. Ten years of my own teaching experience in mainstream language arts classes gave me the impression that boys were harder to engage in literacy activities, struggled more with their writing, were less likely to take upper-level, language arts courses, and yet often still dominated large group discussions. I found the gendered realities of my classroom increasingly pushing me to a different understanding of the practices of literacy. Current literacy research from a variety of traditions does verify there is cause for concern. While girls in the U.S. have narrowed the achievement gaps in math and science over the last decade, American boys continue to lag behind girls in literacy skills (NCES, 2007). Similar gendered patterns in literacy achievement have been documented in the U.K. (Moss, 2000; Dunne & Khan, 1998; Hall & Cloes, 1997), Australia (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Connell, 1996; Martino, 1995) and in Canada (Gambell & Hunter, 2000).

These achievement gaps are of concern not only for boys' access to continuing education and economic opportunities, but also for their personal and social development. If literacy is one of the key ways that we come to understand the world and ourselves, boys may be limited in their access to possible ways of being in the world – particularly ways of being masculine (Barrs, 2000). Theorists in literacy education, literary studies and cultural studies maintain the central importance of narrative to identity development (Fiske, 1989; Davies, 1993; Vinz, 2000). Barrs (2000) suggested that reading is “one of the main psychological tools available to us in the process of becoming a person because of the access it gives us to other and wider ways of being” (p. 289). Young (2000) argued that the broader social

implications for this literacy gap are great: “unless we develop strategies in which boys and young men can work toward destabilizing hegemonic, masculine practices that define men in opposition to women and subordinate males, gender equity will be superficial, at best” (p. 315).

Reading, as it is currently enacted in schools, may also be seen as inconsistent with boys’ perception of masculine practices (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Newkirk, 2002; Brozo, 2002). The silence, the passivity, the lack of social interaction, and physical control that school-based reading practices demand are all cited as possible ways in which boys may further come to see reading as feminized. As gender transgression is much more ridiculed for boys than girls, getting boys to participate in a perceived feminine activity is highly problematic (Millard, 1997).

An additional explanation offered for boys’ lack of progress in literacy skills concerns the texts used in formal educational settings. Research shows that these texts are not always consistent with boys’ preferences. First, boys’ have stronger preferences for male protagonists (Brozo, 1997; Johnson, Peer, & Baldwin, 1984), and for non-fiction (Moss, 2000) than girls. Both boys and girls state preferences for genres rarely taught or even available in school, such as horror, fantasy, humor, comics and magazines (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Worthy, Moorman & Turner, 1999; Worthy, 1998). Thus, the focus on the “classics” and realistic fiction in so many classrooms across grade levels may further discourage boys’ interest in reading.

Although there generally appears to be a mismatch between boys and traditional school-based literacy, boys do practice literacy in diverse ways. While most of the current research focuses on what boys do not do, there is a growing interest in what literacy practices do engage boys. Traditional classroom texts, pedagogies and practices may be a part of the problem for many boys; and these are certainly areas where educators can attempt to effect change (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Brozo, 2002; Newkirk, 2002; Moss, 2000; Dunne & Khan, 1998; Davies, 1993).

As educators it is our responsibility to find texts and practices that can motivate and cultivate the skills of all of our students. In this paper I examine one such practice, peer reading groups or literature circles, which contains the theoretical promise of democratic pedagogy. The central goal of this research was to understand how adolescents practise literacy within the context of a peer reading group, and how gender impacts these practices. Although I was primarily interested in investigating the ways this approach was used by boys, I firmly believe that this practice is also compatible with the literacy needs of girls in the immediate classroom context, and with feminist goals of gender equity. Furthermore, I believe this type of practice may have the potential to disrupt the reenactment of gender, race, and class hierarchies often implied in more traditional classroom pedagogies. Finally, it is important to state from the outset, that to frame any research through a gendered lens is to risk an essentialized, dichotomous set of conclusions. Gender is not a monolithic aspect of identity – it is highly contextual and constantly negotiated, particularly as it intersects with other important cultural, economic and social factors. Not only do I hope to avoid this pitfall of gender-focused studies in my analysis, but it is this type of reductionist thinking which I hope can be combated through alternative approaches to literacy instruction such as literature circles.

## **A PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH TO LITERACY AND DEMOCRACY**

Certainly, changing the textual content of the literature classroom is a necessary, first step in developing a curriculum which encourages new ways of being for all students. Yet, without a corresponding paradigm shift in pedagogy, the desired outcomes of diversity education will not be achieved. As hooks (1995) argued, “Education as the practice of freedom is not just about liberatory knowledge, it’s about a liberatory practice in the classroom” (p. 147). Unfortunately, the main tenets of traditional, literary instructional practices are fraught with dichotomous, hierarchical thinking, and may in part limit the participation of many disengaged students, regardless of gender.

In the traditional literature classroom, the teacher controls both the initiation (questioning) phase, as well as the follow-up phase of the sequence (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991; Alpert, 1987). Coupled with the New Critical perspective that has dominated the theoretical stance of most high school and college classrooms over the last seventy years (Applebee, 1996), many English classrooms have come to resemble recitations rather than discussions. Nystrand & Gamoran (1991) found that inauthentic questions and low level evaluation of student responses, typical features of recitation, resulted in less student engagement in discussions. Such findings led them to conclude that “substantive engagement is only possible in instructional arrangements where students as well as teachers have input into the business of learning” (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991, p. 266). Thus, for pedagogy to be more democratic, and ideally to engage more students in authentic learning, the locus of authority must be shifted away from both the teacher and the text.

Without a critical literacy pedagogy, the democratization of the literature curriculum cannot take place. This approach allows multiple perspectives to exist and conflict with one another. Bakhtin’s (1981) conceptualization of dialogue permitted a range of theorists and researchers to articulate a vision of a more democratic relationship between language and learning; it also provides a link between pedagogy and classroom practice. The theoretical shift in literary studies can be seen as a shift away from the monologism of teacher centered, New Critical perspectives, toward an increasing dialogism of reader-response and multiple critical perspectives. Dialogism is also congruent with the theories of the Vygotskian premise that social interaction, particularly through language, is vital to learning. Dialogism evokes a clearer vision of what democratic practices may look like in the classroom: these practices must be student-centered and allow for the dialogic exchange of multiple and conflicting perspectives. This type of pedagogy has the potential to improve engagement and to adhere to the principles of liberatory education for all students, regardless of gender, race or socio-economic status.

## **LITERATURE CIRCLES: BOOK CLUBS IN THE CLASSROOM**

One particular practice that can potentially combine the features of dialogic principles and critical literacy pedagogy is the use of literature circles (also referred to as book clubs, or peer-led discussions). Because they are normally student-led, literature circles have the potential to disrupt and destabilize traditional teacher-centred literacy practices. Students choose the texts they will read, set their reading

agenda, and prepare their own topics for discussion. They then meet regularly with a small group of their peers several times to discuss their responses to the text (Daniels, 2002; Raphael et al., 1992; Raphael & McMahon, 1994). For boys, these practices might be especially important: the elements of choice, control and social interaction present in literature circles correspond closely to literacy practices boys already value (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Research also has suggested that effective literacy teachers make reading a social activity both in whole-class and small-group formats (Graham, 1999; Moss, 2000).

Within literature circles, interpretation is meant to be a collaborative process, achieved primarily through dialogue between students. Eeds & Wells (1989) studied reading groups that were lead by pre-service teachers. Groups' discussions revealed that they were able to construct meanings together through dialogue, and did so by using a variety of response strategies. McMahon (1997), Raphael & McMahon (1994), and Raphael et al. (1992) found that students required significant instruction in both *what* and *how* to discuss; in initial book clubs, the students often reenacted the IRE sequence, and excluded other students from the conversation. Annington (2001) found that the book club setting fostered discussion that was more personal, more collaborative, and less teacher or text directed. Book clubs have been used successfully at a juvenile detention center (Hill & Van Horn, 1995), in basic adult literacy classes in Spain (Flecha, 2000), and there have also been suggestions that reading groups might help girls find and sustain their voices in classroom conversations where boys often dominate (Johnson, 2002).

On the other hand, some researchers have found that literature circles may not always be sites of democratic practices, and may actually reinforce some gender and racial stereotypes. The meanings generated by peer groups without teacher intervention may lead to stereotyped gender roles, text selections and responses (Orellana, 1995). Alvermann (1995) reported on the gendered nature of peer-led discussions in middle school, particularly on how male and female students use silence in different ways to achieve or relinquish power in the group. Evans (1996) also found gender-based problems: the boys in this study consistently positioned themselves as having more power than the girls, particularly through teasing or social talk. The girls in the group were eventually denied a leadership role, although in different ways, and with different responses. The author concluded that the discourses enacted in this group did not help the students achieve a more supportive or democratic experience, but that the conflicts might help the students form a complex notion of themselves and the positioning they experienced. Lewis (2001) observed that the relationships in combined fifth/sixth grade classrooms' book clubs were defined by both "social and interpretive power", which often meant "making visible its lack in others" (Lewis, 2001, pp. 97-98). As in Evans' observations, the boys tended to play a disruptive role. However, in this classroom, the older girls tended to dominate the discussions by playing the role of the teacher and by excluding students based on prior social allegiances. Lewis concluded that the "achievement and interruption" (p. 116) of these power structures were the most prominent features of peer-led discussions in this classroom.

This prior research indicates that there are disparities between how boys and girls enact their literacy. These disparities may not only affect boys' access to education and career opportunities; but may also affect their social and personal development.

Traditional classroom texts, pedagogies and practices may be a part of the problem for many boys; and these are certainly areas where educators can attempt to effect change. Specifically, literature circles may offer the opportunity for students to have some choice over text selection, manage their own discussions, and work collaboratively with their peers in making sense of texts. These are all revisions of the traditional classroom, which seem to appeal especially to boys without disadvantaging girls. At the same time, the ability of students to do the hard work of interrogating traditional gender (or race or class) stereotypes within literature circles has remained largely unstudied, especially with older students who have been given access to multiple critical perspectives, such as feminism, Marxism and multiculturalism.

## METHODOLOGY

The central goal of this research was to understand how older adolescents practised literacy within the context of a peer reading group and how gender impacted those practices. In order to address this topic, I chose to focus on two particular questions: 1) How did gender and race positioning impact the group dynamics in literature circles? 2) How did students utilize literary theories, particularly gender theories, when in literature circles and how did the meanings they constructed challenge or reinforce traditional discourses of gender? In other words, I wanted to examine gender in relation to both *how* the students discussed and *what* they discussed. My hope was that by examining these issues, I could begin to determine whether the theoretical and pedagogical promise of literature circles actually held. Could one practice improve boys' engagement in my classroom, allow girls greater space for their own voices, and promote social justice? What did I need to do as the instructor in order to make good on this promise?

This study was conducted at the large, Midwestern American, suburban high school where I have taught for the last eight years. My role in this study was both researcher and teacher. The communities surrounding the school are somewhat diverse in terms of socio-economic status and, increasingly, in racial/ethnic composition. At the time of this study, approximately 18% of the building's students were ethnic or racial minorities, and a slightly smaller percentage qualified for free or reduced lunch; both of these percentages were growing. Additionally, although the surrounding communities were traditionally white, working-class suburbs, there has also been recent growth in the number of white-collar workers from 22% in 1990 to 32% in 2000.

All of the participants in this research project came from one 12<sup>th</sup>-grade English course that I taught. In general, this group of students indicated they were not avid readers, particularly not of extended works of either fiction or non-fiction. Only one girl and one boy reported being "frequent" readers of fiction; only one girl said she was a frequent reader of non-fiction books.

This project arose from a new initiative in my school's 12<sup>th</sup>-grade English program. During each semester of the 12<sup>th</sup>-grade year, students at my school participated in an independent reading assignment involving a modern or contemporary novel or extended work of narrative non-fiction. These texts were selected from a list of approximately ten, teacher-identified options each term. This year, for the first time,

the 12<sup>th</sup> grade team (3 colleagues and myself) decided to add an ongoing discussion group component to this independent reading – we chose to rename the assignment “Book Club.” As we initially implemented the book club assignment in our courses, my colleagues and I wrote, revised and expanded the assignment several times. My goal in initiating this research project was to conduct a more thorough and systematic analysis of the book club that might lead to a continuing interrogation of the strengths and weaknesses of the book club format as a means of literacy instruction.

In implementing the book club assignment for this research project, I began by introducing students to the book club assignment and my research project, followed by a brief description of each of the 10 possible books. Students were then asked to list their top three choices in order, and turn in their selections. I sorted the student’s choices initially by first request for a book, and then began to sort students into small reading groups. Although students’ choices were the first consideration in respect of group formation, I attempted to balance groups in total number and in terms of gender. The individual student’s engagement in the class and in reading generally also played a factor – most often by assuring I would place less engaged students into their first choice groups.

Audiotapes of book club discussions formed the primary source of data for this study. Each group met four times each term for approximately 30 minutes each time. Meetings were held once per week, with students expected to read and journal independently in the interim. Transcripts of these tapes were then analyzed through two different perspectives. In the first analysis I examined group dynamics in terms of each group’s ability to sustain critical dialogue and in terms of the role that gender might have played in interactions between group members. The second analysis focused on the content of the discussion, particularly in terms of how students “took up” gendered stances toward characters and situations depicted in the texts. In this second analysis, I first identified segments of discussion in which gender, race or class were addressed either explicitly or implicitly in students’ stances toward texts. Then I searched for thematic patterns in these initial segments. These analyses formed the basis of most of the data included in this paper. Most of the data discussed in this paper came from two focus groups. However, I occasionally include a highly pertinent example from one of the other groups.

Written documents were also collected in order to supplement the transcripts. The documents collected included an initial, literacy interests survey conducted the first week of the term and the written work that students were required to complete as part of their book club assignment. This work included four reading response journals each term (these journals served as preparation for four book club discussions), self and group assessments of discussions, and a final group project. These documents were used primarily to add clarity to students’ responses to the texts and for further evaluation of the group process in the book clubs.

Given that book club discussions took place “in class,” my ability to observe and take field notes on the interactions of each group was limited during most discussion days. I took brief observational notes on the groups during or immediately after most discussions. I also took field notes on other activities that surrounded my introduction of the books and the project to the students, their selection of books and the formations of groups. Finally, I jotted down initial impressions after listening to each

audiotape to help identify which tapes might be particularly useful for further analysis.

During most book club meetings, I sat at some distance from the individual groups, observing and evaluating their discussions. Occasionally, groups stopped me to ask questions about books or procedures. In a few instances, I briefly joined a group discussion. However, one of the main tenets of the book club format holds that the work is student driven, and my role within each group was very limited. Nonetheless, the fact that this was a graded assignment – worth 15% of students' grades each term – meant that to some extent the students were expected to conform to the expectations that I had laid out for the assignment. This undoubtedly remained a main source of motivation for many of the students.

There were several limitations that I encountered during this study, which may limit the generalizability of the results. First, a significant gender imbalance in the classroom studied and a lack of consenting participants during the first term meant that no exclusively male groups were studied. Given that certain discourses surrounding gender might be more comfortably discussed in a single-gender setting, this may have limited the openness of some of the boys' conversations. Although I have drawn on students' written evaluations of themselves, each other and the book club format, in retrospect, I could have also strengthened my data collection with one-on-one interviews of certain students regarding their experiences in their book clubs.

For the sake of this paper, I will turn my attention to two focal groups: from the first term I will focus on the group that read *The things they carried* and from the second term I will focus on the group that read *Balzac and the little Chinese seamstress*. These groups were selected because members of both groups represented diversity in terms of gender and race, factors that created interesting challenges and opportunities for the groups.

### ***The things they carried* group**

The first book club group I selected as a focal group read Tim O'Brien's collection of short stories about the Vietnam War, *The things they carried*. The stories relate the experiences of a platoon of soldiers before, during and after the war. The book's structure and themes invite a complex interrogation of the nature of fiction versus non-fiction, as well as the nature of war. This was a text that had appeared unusually successful in engaging students, and particularly boys, during prior semesters; thus I was partially interested in seeing how students chose to discuss this text in the context of their book club group. The group was comprised of three white boys (David, Chad, and Mike), one first generation Vietnamese-American boy (Ly), and one white girl (Amanda). Chad and Mike had been raised in blue-collar families, and were planning futures in technical fields. Ly's immigrant family was struggling to survive, but he planned to attend community college after graduation. Amanda was planning to begin college at a local community college, then move to an institution out of state. David was planning to go directly to a four-year school out of state.

### ***The Balzac and the little Chinese seamstress* group**

The book club group that read *Balzac and the little Chinese seamstress* consisted of four students, three boys and one girl. The novel is set during the Cultural Revolution

in China, and tells the story of two, upper-middle-class boys who are sent to a rural village for reeducation. While there, they come into a collection of forbidden Western novels, and both fall for the same beautiful seamstress. Ly, a member of *The things they carried* group, was a member of this group in the second term. Jacob, a high-achieving white boy had a substantial amount of interpretive authority in the classroom and in this group. He was a hard-working student who earned high grades in my class and was a frequent participant in whole-class discussions. He was very polite and respectful in the large group setting. At the same time, he seemed to hold and wield authority over the group because of his status as the only native English speaker in the group. Mai was a first-generation, Hmong-American girl. She described herself and her family as “traditional”, but she was also interested in learning about other cultures. Mai was taking night school at the same time she was enrolled in my course so that she could graduate on time. Phuan was of Vietnamese descent, had been adopted by a white family in the United States, but also maintained a relationship with his birth family in Vietnam. Phuan’s birth father was a doctor, while his adopted father was a lawyer. Despite two highly educated role models in his life families, and fairly strong English language skills, Phuan was not interested in academic work, and intended to become a mechanic. Although he did end up earning credit, almost all of his assignments were either late or missing altogether.

The group initially formed around the three boys’ desire to work together – they each put down three identical choices on their book request. They ended up receiving their second choice book, *Balzac*, and were somewhat resistant to reading it from the beginning. Mai was absent the day the students choose their books, and thus had to pick from the groups which had openings remaining. She selected the *Balzac* group, most likely because of her friendship with the boys. This meant that all three of the students of Asian heritage in the class were members of the same group.

## GROUP DYNAMICS WITHIN BOOK CLUBS

### Discussion roles: Monologic versus dialogic interactions

Given that the book club format was new to both students and 12<sup>th</sup> grade teachers, the 12<sup>th</sup> grade team choose to rely on Daniels’ (1994, 2002) literature circle model quite heavily, in particular the roles he developed to help students focus on particular tasks while reading and discussing.<sup>1</sup> We revised the roles initially to tailor them to our older students and to include a new role: the multiple, perspective-taker’s task was to bring relevant literary theories that we had been using in class into the discussion.

As the book clubs got underway, I became concerned about the way the roles were used within some of the groups. Some groups used them infrequently, or as a fallback when they weren’t sure what to talk about next. But other groups’ over-reliance on the roles led to discussions that were more monologic and lacking in coherence. Only one of the transcripts revealed a book club meeting consisting almost solely of individuals presenting their roles with little other interaction; however, an interruption in flow

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<sup>1</sup> Students are typically assigned a specific but unique written task to prepare for each group meeting. Common roles include discussion director, summarizer, quote finder, illustrator and word wizard.



was evident in many of the discussions when the students “presented” their roles rather than integrated the ideas into their conversation. Typically, the longest turns in most discussions were students assigned the role of summarizer. Occasionally, this role wouldn’t appear until well into the conversation, when many of the major plot details had already been discussed. Tannen (1990) suggested that information-giving “frames one as the expert, superior in knowledge, and the other as uninformed, inferior in knowledge” (p. 63) and thus creates hierarchy. Another potential concern with the roles is the misinterpretation of the discussion director role. The title itself seems to instill the role with more power than other roles. Although the description indicates that the role is not about “nit-picking” questions, the interpretation of it by the students occasionally tended to the authoritarian and led to uneven distribution of turns. It is notable that Daniels’ (2002) own research uncovered similar problems with the predetermined roles generally, and recommended that they be used cautiously and only temporarily. We chose to replace the role of discussion director with the less authoritarian “questioner”. I agree that the roles were useful in helping the students use a variety of approaches in their response to the texts. At the same time, it seems to me that most of the roles, if used at all, should have a questioning aspect in mind, given that questions may more naturally help students promote dialogue in their groups.

In response to my concerns over the roles promoting a more monologic mode of conversation, an additional revision that I implemented during the semester was to start suggesting that most of the roles could be completed through writing questions. Although not all students used this suggestion, a reconceptualization of the discussion roles as a guide for formulating questions from different theoretical perspectives (such as New Critical, reader-response, feminist, multicultural, and so on) seemed to help integrate the roles more smoothly into the conversation and limit the more monologic “presentation” of roles that could inhibit the exchange of ideas between students.

### **Gender and racial dynamics within book club discussions**

Generally speaking, students in the book clubs seemed to treat each other with respect and be considerate of one another’s ideas. Students rarely used one another’s names in their conversations, although this may be as much a sign of familiarity as it could be of distance. One of the most surprising features of many of the transcripts was how few overt disagreements there were, regardless of the gender or racial make-up of the groups. This may have partially been a function of the high number of girls in the class, for as Tannen (1990) suggested, “To most women, conflict is a threat to connection, to be avoided at all costs” (p. 150). This lack of overt conflict within the conversation could also be related to Midwestern, regional, cultural preferences, the homogeneity of the classroom, or perhaps to the student’s social positioning within a group of their peers. In any case, the most ubiquitous word in this group of transcripts was “yeah”. If dialogue is in part defined by tension (Nystrand, 1997), then this lack of conflicting ideas might indicate that book clubs as a form need to find methods to provoke and sustain a wider range of responses.

At the same time, there were groups and situations in which gender and race seemed to be a factor in students’ struggles over interpretive, linguistic and organizational authority in the groups. Although I attempted to avoid isolating students by gender or race in groups, this was not always possible given the student choice inherent in the

book club; when such isolations did occur, it led to less democratic relationships within groups.

### **The *Balzac and the little Chinese seamstress* group**

The book club which read *Balzac and the little Chinese seamstress* had the most overt instances of both gender and racial asymmetry in their interactions. Mai, who liked the book from the beginning, was given the role of discussion director for every meeting (even though the students were supposed to rotate). She had to fight to get her opinions in favour of the book articulated, and then fight to keep the group on topic. In the meantime, Jacob and Ly vehemently complained about the book, and frequently used obscenities, sexual and scatological references to make tangential jokes and insult one another. Ly tended to introduce humor, while Jacob employed insults more frequently. The roles enacted by these students closely resembled the book club observations made by Lewis (2001), in which girls assumed the role of teacher, while boys attempted to disrupt their authority by joking or off-task conversation. Phuan didn't speak much in either transcript. He may not have read consistently, as his self-evaluation stated that he read about 75% of the book; but he also may have been resisting some of the dynamics which lead to unequal distribution of authority in this group.

Tannen (1990) suggested that joke-telling and flouting authority can be seen as ways to negotiate status in all-male groups. That Ly did not utilize these strategies during his first book club experience in reading *The things they carried*, but consistently did so in the *Balzac* group makes it appear as though this was an attempt to gain status among this particular group. The necessity of Ly's jokester persona in this group might have stemmed from Jacob's status and continual reassertion of that status in the group. Jacob's ritualized insults were a common feature of his group's discussions. He insulted the book and both of the other boys repeatedly. Such insults traded among boys certainly can be read as part of a ritual bonding (Newkirk, 2002), however as the group's discussions continued, Jacob seemed to more aggressively assert his linguistic and interpretive authority over both Ly and Phuan.

Jacob had a substantial amount of interpretive authority in the classroom and this group. He was very polite and respectful in the large group setting, which caused me to be surprised when I began to notice the overtly authoritarian role he took in his group. Jacob's status as the only native English speaker in the group may have led to some of the power he held in the group. The following segment reveals one instance when Jacob utilized his language proficiency to assert his power in the group.

- Mai: They've got some really hard words in here. I didn't understand some of the words.
- Ly: Yes they do, they've got hard words. I don't think an Asian guy should have like that hard of words.
- Mai: But it was translated. 5
- Jacob: This was translated from French.
- Ly: Oh, oh, oh . I thought he was Chinese.
- Jacob: Yeah, it went from Chinese to French to English.
- Ly: And the words are hard.
- Jacob: No they're not. 10
- Ly: That's cuz you're white. (Jacob laughs)

- Jacob: Show me one. Show me one hard word.  
 Ly: There's plenty there.  
 Jacob: Show me one then.  
 Ly: Oh, that's too much work, man. 15  
 Jacob: Let's see.  
 Mai: Did anybody ummm. . .  
 Jacob: How about "whore"? Do you know what that *mean*?  
 Ly: No.  
 Jacob: Oh, ummm. Okay. 20

Ly pointed out that Jacob's whiteness made it easier for him to read this text, but Jacob ignored this concept and instead challenged Ly to prove that the language is difficult by showing him "one hard word". When Ly refused, Jacob shifted into two linguistic insults. First, he insulted Ly's comprehension (and potentially his masculinity) by asking him the definition of "whore". He then more subtly insulted Ly's linguistic competency by dropping the "s" ending on "mean" (line 18), imitating a non-standard, verb formation common with non-native, Asian speakers of English. Additionally, if providing information can be seen as a negotiation of status (Tannen, 1990), when Jacob (incorrectly) gives the details about the book's linguistic history, he further established his authority in this group.

This example was not an isolated incident. Jacob also proved unwilling to admit when he did make an interpretative error. In this passage, he used another linguistic device, a pun, to attempt to confuse Ly after a disagreement over a detail from the novel:

- Jacob: So what do you think about Luo going crazy and slapping him?  
 Ly: Luo didn't go crazy.  
 Jacob: Yeah he did, he went in the tunnel. In the coal mines – remember when they had to like hit him with the stick and stuff.  
 Ly: Oh – no that wasn't, they hit him because he was bad. 5  
 When they hit him with a bamboo stick or another stick.  
 Jacob: Whatever, they hit him.  
 Ly: Yeah, they hit him cuz he was bad. To take his sickness away.  
 Jacob: I thought he was crazy. That's what he said.  
 Ly: Man, he was going crazy *in the bed*. 10  
 Jacob: See, he's still going crazy.  
 Ly: But not in the mine!  
 Jacob: Well, how do you go crazy in the bed, your *mind* tells you.  
 Ly: Oh, I thought you were saying in the mine place  
 Jacob: No the M-I-N-D! 15  
 Phuan: Oh, you were just fucking with him.  
 Jacob: I know, but I said "mind", with a "D".

Jacob seemed unable to admit that he might have misread or mistakenly remembered the passage. Instead, he double-talked his way around the disagreement with Ly, and then attempted to divert the attention away from his error by confusing Ly with a pun. When his interpretive authority was threatened, Jacob utilized his linguistic authority over Ly.

One additional feature of this group's dynamics developed as Jacob co-opted some Vietnamese phrases that Ly apparently had taught him. Occasionally throughout both taped discussions, Jacob utilized this cursory knowledge of Vietnamese to irritate

Phuan. Phuan was adopted by a white family and had been raised in the United States, but he also knew his birth family still living in Vietnam. Phuan eventually passed both terms of English, but he was constantly late with assignments and in danger of failing. At the very end of their second tape, Jacob clearly provoked Phuan with a series of insults about his complex identity, as well as his academic work.

Jacob: (? Unknown words in Vietnamese.)  
 Phuan: You say it too fast, slow down.  
 Ly: (repeats what Jacob said)  
 Phuan: I don't understand.  
 Ly: Yeah you do. 5  
 Phuan: No I don't. Why would I ask you to say it twice?  
 Jacob: (more Vietnamese). I know more Viet than him, I know like 20 words.  
 Phuan: Cuz it's impossible.  
 Jacob: You're waddo(?). Just like you're in a white family,  
 Phuan: I am. 10  
 Jacob: Just like your passing this class. Here's a question. . .  
 Phuan: Shut it off.  
 Jacob: Who is passing this class? (Tape turned off.)

Jacob's attempt to turn his few phrases of Vietnamese into linguistic authority escalated in this instance. He asserted his superior knowledge of Phuan's ancestral language, his superior grades, and presumably was insinuating something about the superiority of his family situation. That Phuan became frustrated enough to have the tape turned off was not surprising. What was surprising was that Phuan's final evaluation of the book club did not contain any negative commentary on his experience with this book group. His evaluations of all the other group members were positive and each was given the highest possible score.

Jacob's repeated verbal attacks on both Ly and Phuan, and Mai's struggle to have her voice heard, suggest that isolation of students by gender and/or ethnicity within a book club can lead to asymmetrical interactions that either privilege or marginalize the isolate, depending on the configuration of the group.

## **MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES IN BOOK CLUBS: DISCUSSIONS OF GENDER**

The assessment of *what* was said or not said in book clubs, particularly the discourses surrounding femininity and masculinity and their intersection with race or class, formed the second major aspect of analysis. Although this course was designed using an archetypal approach, students were given an introduction to other critical theories at the beginning of the semester based on Appleman's (2000) work on incorporating critical lenses into the high-school, language arts curriculum. Assignments and discussions encouraged the use of these concepts throughout the semester. However, the lenses took on more significance during the second term of the course as we studied the systematic oppression of groups in the irony archetype, focusing particularly on gender, class and race. Perhaps as a result of this work, second-term book clubs were more likely to apply critical lenses to their texts.

I was particularly interested in how students would take up multiple interpretations of a text in the context of their book clubs. Not surprisingly, the application of critical lenses by the book clubs was uneven, and seemingly often linked to the groups' interpersonal dynamics. In addition to creating inequality in the group dynamics, isolation by race or gender also proved to limit the ability of isolated students to sustain dialogue with their peers about these critical issues. Conversely, the all-girl groups seemed to have the most consistent critical discussions about gender and race, while the boys seemed less likely to explicitly discuss or critique gendered constructions.

### Discourses of femininity in isolation: Amanda and Mai

Like the examples of asymmetrical dynamics within the *Balzac* group, the presence of a female student isolated in otherwise male groups impacted the discourse about female characters and femininity in general. In these cases, while the female participants brought a critical perspective to the discussion of femininity, the male group members did not reciprocate and engage these issues from a critical stance.

Amanda, the only girl in *The things they carried* group, was also reading a book in which all of the main characters were male. When she attempted to introduce a female perspective into certain parts of the discussion, it was without much success. The following excerpt comes from the group's second meeting in which they discussed "The sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong", one of the only chapters in which a female character plays an central active role. In the story, Mary Ann comes from America to a medical outpost in Vietnam to visit her boyfriend. She eventually joins a group of Green Berets stationed nearby, starts going out on missions with them, and is last seen wearing a necklace of human tongues. Amanda, who was discussion director for this meeting, began the conversation about this story.

- Amanda: What did you guys think of the girl coming to see her boyfriend or whatever?
- David: I thought that was kinda weird, I don't think she should've done that.
- Amanda: Come to visit him?
- David: Yeah, I don't know, it's just really distracting. 5
- Amanda: Yeah.
- David: I don't know.
- Amanda: But then again, they're just, they didn't do a whole lot besides when they got a couple sick patients, then they deal with that and then. . .
- David: That's true. I just – I don't know. 10
- Ly: I think it's dumb. Why would you want to bring your girl in a town full of guys – a base full of guys, you know?
- Amanda: (chuckles)
- David: Yeah, I agree.
- Amanda: What did you think about when she. . . 15
- Ly: started going crazy?
- Amanda: Yeah. When she went psycho.
- Ly: Yeah, that was pretty dumb. Stupid. But still, face it, in a camp full of guys you know, things happen.

The boys in the group described Mary Ann's arrival as "weird", "distracting", and "dumb". The idea of bringing one's girlfriend into war clearly makes them uncomfortable. Amanda reasoned against David's statement, suggesting that Mary

Ann might not be a distraction, because at this particular outpost the soldiers were not very busy. David seemed to want to say something more, but hesitated, repeating “I don’t know” three times (lines 5, 7 & 10). When Ly brought up the threat of sexual violence implied by bringing a young woman into “a base full of guys”, David agreed. Amanda tried to turn the conversation away from the threat of rape, to Mary Ann’s transformation into a Green Beret. Ly dismissed this transformation as “stupid” and, despite the fact that no rape occurs, refused to read the story any other way.

The excerpt of the conversation on its own doesn’t reveal Amanda’s critical stance, yet Amanda’s other responses indicated she had read this story using a feminist lens. In the final group meeting, Amanda chose this as her favourite story in the book, yet despite her interest, she did not pursue the conversation here any further in the face of the boys’ reading of the narrative. However, in her journal, she revealed a feminist interpretation of the chapter that does not prescribe to Mary Ann a stereotypical victim role (Davies, 1993). She noted that the Green Berets had superiority over the men at the medical unit. Mary Ann’s alignment with these powerful men presumably put her in a position superior to her boyfriend and his compatriots in the medical unit. At the same time, Amanda was sympathetic to Mary Ann’s transformation into a “psycho” (line 16) warrior. She wrote, “I think it’s good that Mary Ann realized life didn’t have to be all planned out....I wonder what made her start acting the way she did. Maybe it was because she was afraid to go back to her old life where she wasn’t happy.” The fact that Amanda did not pursue her feminist reading of the story in the discussion suggests the difficulty of raising a critical perspective when a more traditional interpretation is being asserted by other group members. This struggle was likely exacerbated by her position as the only girl in the group.

During the second term, Mai had similar problems asserting a feminist reading of *Balzac and the little Chinese seamstress*. Like “The sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong”, this story is told from a predominantly male perspective and involves a dramatic transformation of a female character from a passive to an assertive character. The following excerpt is from the group’s third discussion:

- Mai: The narrator said the only reason he and Luo took the book was the little seamstress told them to?
- Ly: Not really.
- Jacob: No, they wanted books and they get one, and they wanted more and more.
- Ly: Seriously, she seems like just a slut. 5
- Jacob: She seems like a big slut. I think she’s going to get the narrator and then seduce him too.
- Mai: No. I think Luo is a very romantic guy.
- Phuan: There’s going to be a threesome. (Ly laughs)
- Mai: Because, the little seamstress doesn’t know anything. All she 10 knows is seaming dresses, sewing clothes and stuff or whatever.
- Jacob: [“seaming dresses” (sarcasm)]
- Mai: She doesn’t know anything about culture and love and sex and Luo is just a sweet guy, he’s going to go tell her all about it
- Ly: [She’s not a virgin no more.] 15
- Mai: Like he’s going change the little seamstress. I can’t wait to know her side of the story.
- Ly: She gets banged too much.

All of the boys refused to acknowledge Mai's positive reading of the seamstress's character. They persisted in berating the character by focusing on her sexuality as deviant: she's "a slut" who gets "banged too much" and will participate in "a threesome". Mai recognized that the seamstress is positioned as uneducated and uncultured, but she read the relationship between the seamstress and her lover Luo as more than merely sexual. Mai anticipated the change that the seamstress's education would provoke, but was also anxious to hear her speak for herself. Although Mai's reading was romanticized, it also contained the beginning of a critical stance.

Later in the conversation, she received some assistance from Jacob in her more feminist reading, in which they both noted that the seamstress had not yet been given her own voice in the story:

- Jacob: What do you think about the little seamstress?  
 Ly: She's horny!  
 Mai: No she's not. She barely talks in the story.  
 Jacob: I know I said that too.  
 Ly: [Hey, hey, hey quiet girls are most of them, most quiet girls are crazy behind locked doors. 5  
 Jacob: They talk about her a lot in the book but she doesn't talk much so far.  
 Mai: [They talk about her, but she doesn't say anything.  
 Ly: They talk about her getting laid.  
 Jacob: Yeah.  
 Mai: What's so important about the little seamstress? Like what? 10  
 Jacob: She gets laid and that's about it.  
 Mai: No.

Despite the brief collaboration with Jacob here, Mai's reading of the story was not given much attention by the boys in her group. Ly in particular seemed to undermine any attempt to have a non-sexualized discussion of the character. As he had in other parts of the discussions, he seemed intent on saying anything to provoke laughter: thus it is difficult to discern how much of what he said he meant to be taken seriously. Nonetheless, his hyper-sexualized reading of the seamstress had the effect of shutting down any sustained interrogation of the seamstress's positioning in the text as a young, rural woman living in the midst of the Cultural Revolution.

As with Amanda, Mai's journal revealed more of her feminist reading than the discussion with her group allowed. The novel ends with the seamstress having an illegal abortion and running away alone to live in the city. Of this ending, Mai wrote:

I personally didn't think it would turn out this way. I was very surprised and shock, just as the narrator and Luo was. I really thought that she would want to keep the baby, but instead she had an abortion....The little seamstress has really changed since she met Luo and the narrator. They changed her life and she knew she could never be the same anymore. I was happy for the little seamstress at the end, even though she didn't tell anyone she was leaving. I guess the little seamstress left because she wanted to experience the world and she knows more about life instead of being in the mountains all her life. She knew "that a woman's beauty was a treasure beyond price".

Mai's surprise at the transformation of the little seamstress was not marked by disgust or disapproval. Meanwhile, the boys' final response journals were highly judgmental

about the seamstress's actions; Ly and Jacob even predicted that the seamstress would become a prostitute in the city. As with Amanda's response to Mary Ann, a feminist perspective appeared to help both girls read the text sympathetically, despite controversial choices made by the female characters.

Flecha (2000) defined egalitarian dialogue as that which "takes different contributions into consideration according to the validity of their reasoning, instead of according to the positions of power held by those who make the contributions" (p. 2). Unfortunately, the male participants in these two groups seemed less willing to reason through the interpretations presented by Amanda and Mai; instead, they dismissed their ideas, thereby limiting the access of all group members to a more critical, dialogic exchange.

### **Discourses of masculinity: The heroic masculine storyline and the trauma of war**

These two focal groups took up the discussion of masculinities in very divergent ways. *The things they carried* group initiated discussion about the complexities of the heroic masculine storyline. And though at times the students seemed reluctant to relinquish the heroic plot and reverted to traditional discourses of masculinity, this book club did permit space for critical dialogue about masculinities to occur. In the *Balzac* group, the power imbalance of the group dynamics discussed earlier was coupled with an almost complete rejection of the text, and almost no critical dialogue about masculinities was sustained.

Davies (1993) asserted that among the group of young boys she had studied, heroic storylines seemed to be "a central feature of exploring (masculine) subjectivities" (p.91). One of the main features of this heroic storyline is the centrality of physical mastery, seen as necessary to gain social acceptance as a male. Newkirk (2002) also found that young boys' fictions tended to allow them to "assume or mock power" (p. 90) through the coded, genre-based use of violence.

*The things they carried* offers a more complex view of the physical and psychological trauma of combat. For students reading this book, the text garnered responses that often interrogated and critiqued the classical heroic storyline, but at the same time, elicited complex and often contradictory concepts of what it meant to be a soldier or a man. For students reading these books in the midst of the war in Iraq, the relevance of these issues was apparent. What may have been a hypothetical question about being drafted or volunteering for military service a few years ago, took on an increased immediacy within these two groups.

In *The things they carried*, one of the early chapters focuses on the choices that a young Tim O'Brien must make after he receives a draft notice. The group discussed how they would make this decision:

Ly: How would you guys think? Would you go to Canada or you stay and get drafted?

Mike: [I would go to Canada.

Amanda: [I would go to Canada. (laughter) Definitely. Would you go?

Ly: I don't know. I'm from Vietnam, so I'll stay. (laughter)

Amanda: If you were . . .

5

Ly: . . .American? I don't know, I'd probably go. I got nothing else



- better to do in life anyways.
- Mike: I'd probably do it if there was a desperate need actually. Cuz, uh, you can't be a coward I guess.
- Amanda: If there was a good reason. And I understood the war, and they had like a reason for going over there then I would. 10
- Mike: Yeah. That's, yeah. People would look down on you. Like he said, that's pretty much why he went. Because he was thinking, well, everyone else would think he was wrong.
- Ly: Do you think it was selfish, just thinking about himself. 15
- Mike: No.
- Amanda: No. It's his life.
- Mike: Yeah.
- David: He's scared.

Although Mike, Amanda, and Ly initially insisted that they would avoid military service, they also began to qualify this statement. Ly's refusal to go to the war was based on his Vietnamese heritage: fighting in Vietnam was not something he would do. But then he also said that if he were American, he would go, because he felt like he had nothing better to do. Ly's lack of confidence in his future options is sadly reminiscent of discourses surrounding positioning as a working-class male in American society. After Ly's explanation, Mike revised his statement. Mike introduced a heroic storyline most explicitly in this exchange; his concern was about being seen as a "coward," which is echoed in the text. Amanda also qualified her initial statement by adding that, if it were a just war, she would go. David was the only one who did not respond to this question on a personal level. His silence might have been indicative of a different perspective on this issue, one which reflected his positioning as the only middle-class, college-bound boy in this group.

In the second part of the exchange, however, Ly reframed the question to ask whether the group saw Tim's desire to avoid the draft as selfish – a concept seemingly contradictory to the heroic storyline. Each of the three respondents supported Tim's character in this dilemma – voicing a discourse of individual freedom ("It's his life") as well as accepting that fear is an appropriate response given the situation. The contradictions in the two segments of the conversation show a break in the heroic storyline. Whereas the classic hero must sacrifice and be brave, Tim may be selfish and scared. This relates to a typically American ideology of self-determination and individuality, which also holds a heroic stature, particularly in its application to discourses of American masculinity. These American heroic ideals stand in contradiction to the notion of military service that requires one to give up one's rights for a cause in which one doesn't believe.

David's discourses about social class also came to the forefront of this dilemma, and further complicated the notion of the heroic storyline in this text:

- Mike: How would you feel if like you were going to Harvard and all that stuff, and you were the smart guy and you got drafted.
- David: [I'd be pissed.
- Amanda: I think it was kinda, I don't know, it's a little rude. You know the way he said that people below him, you know should've gone to the war first before he should. 5
- David: I kinda agree though.
- Mike: Yeah, I kinda agree too. You know he could do more for the

- world, for society, and stuff by going to school.
- Amanda: Yeah but. . . 10
- David: [He was on his way to Harvard, and then some guy that was like working at McDonald's or something didn't even go, or something. It doesn't make much sense.
- Mike: No. ///
- Amanda: I don't know. 15

David's discourses on the relationship between social class and military service, supported by Mike, attempted to naturalize his beliefs by making them seem universal ("It doesn't make much sense", lines 12-13). David argued that Tim's elite education should exempt him from military service, while the uneducated McDonald's employee should be called for duty first. Amanda was not comfortable with David's class-based assessment of who should and should not have to fight in a war; although she did not complete her argument, neither did she indicate agreement with David and Mike. Amanda's recognition of the class bias inherent in Tim's statement indicated that she had found another break in the heroic storyline: a hero wouldn't want someone else "below him" to have to fight in his place. The complexity of their dialogue is evident, particularly as Mike asserted a justification for Tim's feelings that shifted away from the model of the soldier as hero and introduced the concept of the scholar as hero. This breakdown of the mind/body dichotomy inverts that physicality so dominant in discourses of masculinity. Thus, for Mike, Tim could be heroic by helping society through his education, while for Amanda, Tim's assumption that his intellect should place him above military service is selfish and "rude" (line 4).

When the discussion of this story concluded, Mike introduced an exchange based on the final sentence of the story that again problematized the concept of the hero:

- Mike: What about the quote when he's saying he was a coward because he *went* to the war?
- Amanda: I don't know. Some people would probably say he's a coward because he didn't do what he wanted to do, but others would say he's a hero because he went to war. I don't know, I kinda think of him as both.
- Mike: [Yeah, yeah, same here.

Amanda's articulation of her reading continued the deconstruction of the hero/coward binary. The notion that one can be both a hero and a coward at the same time from different perspectives demonstrates the potential for the book club's dialogic interaction to question discourses of traditional masculinity.

Another theme arose in *The things they carried* discussions, which closely related to the masculine heroic storyline: that of the tension between competence and the intense emotional trauma of war. Smith and Wilhelm (2002) argued that feelings of competence and control were central features related to boys' participation in activities; both of which seem to be closely aligned to Davies (1993) description of the heroic storyline. While this book club evaluated the competence of the soldiers, they also recognized that emotions, particularly fear and depression, were real problems which soldiers faced.

At the beginning of the book, a series of stories deals with the lieutenant, Jimmy Cross, and how he felt responsible for the death of one of his soldiers.

- Mike: Who felt at fault for Ted Lavender's death? //
- David: What do you mean?
- Ly: I think it was the Lieutenant. Cuz all his mind was wandering, was thinking about that Martha girl. Didn't pay attention. . .
- Amanda: Yeah, should've been focused on the war. 5
- David: Yeah, he should've been watching too.
- Amanda: It's an accident. Things happen. In the war people die. . . .  
Yeah. Umm, I think that Jimmy should get over Lavender's death.  
He shouldn't blame himself. Things happen.
- Ly: [People die. Sooner or later they die. 10
- Amanda: That wouldn't be a burden I'd want to carry for 40 years, or however long. . .

While the group initially criticized Lieutenant Cross for his lack of competence in the field ("his mind was wandering", "[he] should've been focused on the war", "he should've been watching"), they also almost immediately shifted into a recognition that much of what happened was beyond his control. As Amanda said, "It's an accident. Things happen" (line 7). This reality of war, that much of what happens is unexpected and beyond one's personal control, stands in opposition to the heroic storyline in which physical and emotional control is privileged.

A parallel conversation occurred in the groups' final discussion. In the story, "The ghost soldiers", Tim is shot and then receives incompetent medical care from a new medic, Bobby, which makes his injury worse. The group examined the circumstances that surrounded Bobby's mistakes:

- Ly: If you were Bobby would you have done the same thing? Just sit there and be scared and not heal other people?
- Mike: Yeah, it was – wasn't it his first time out? His first time in the war?
- Amanda: Yeah, but I don't think they should've put him in that position then to be in that kind of authority if he can't help people. 5
- David: But that was like everyone's position in the war.
- Ly: He knows how to help people, but maybe he's like scared.  
Maybe he doesn't have the experience.
- David: Yeah.
- Amanda: Yeah. 10
- Mike: I guess he was doing good after, he just had to get used to the war, the shooting and stuff.

Although Amanda wasn't sure that Bobby should have been put into this vital role if he couldn't perform competently, the boys were all sympathetic to his situation. He lacked "experience", and was "scared", thus the boys seemed to indicate that these were acceptable to their own discourses of masculinity. At the same time, Mike also noted that Bobby's level of competence had improved "after he got used to the war"; he appeared to reassert a discourse of masculine control over emotions and competence, which could be gained through experience. David brought the conversation to a close with his final thematic analysis of this story: "It kinda shows that fears are sometimes worse than pains in war, like than the actual pain in war." His statement evoked the body/mind binary opposition by recognizing that the mental anguish of fear can be worse than the physical pain that soldiers experience in war. By validating the emotional trauma of war, the group demonstrated that they found

this an acceptable part of discourses on masculinity. Ly seemed surprised to make this discovery:

- Ly: It's kinda funny how a man can be so depressing when he went to war. Huh? Did you guys think?
- Amanda: What?
- Ly: The guys are all depressed and everything in war.
- David: [Oh yeah, I think that's normal. 5
- Amanda: [Yeah, completely normal. Just because you . . .
- Chad: It's something you're not used to.
- David: And because most of the guys didn't even want to be there. I mean if was something they believed in fighting for they'd probably be more motivated. 10
- Amanda: I would be depressed if I had to kill people and watch my friends be killed and things like that. Everyday.

As a group, the dialogue they participated in seemed to move the students into a recognition that emotional trauma is a "normal" aspect of masculinity when faced with the problems of killing and dying in war. At the same time, Mike, Chad, Ly and Amanda at various times expressed their beliefs in the heroic masculine storyline through a discourse which valued the competence and control that one might gain through experience.

Despite the critical approach to some masculine discourses, other traditional discourses of masculinity were upheld during the groups' discussions. In *The things they carried* group, Amanda's questions were often the catalyst for discussions about gender roles. She raised questions that interrogated some of the reasoning behind stereotypically masculine behaviour in the text. The boys did not always sustain critical interrogations into issues of masculinity, particularly when the practices appeared to match their own (Young 2000).

Despite the more complicated and problematized notions of the hero and masculinity that *The things they carried* group worked through, this group at times reasserted the notion of a dominant physicality. In particular, the issue arose over the destruction of the body in war. In this group, a severe injury to the body was an agreed-upon reason for death. Chad and Ly agreed that if death was imminent, helping a friend die more quickly and painlessly was appropriate and desirable. At the same time, Chad also expressed that the loss of one leg did not merit such action. Chad anticipated that there would be a breaking point, when the destruction of the body was severe enough that it would be easier to die than to "deal with" the disfiguration to the body. This excerpt indicated that a discourse of dominant physicality was still considered relevant under certain circumstances to these groups of students.

Twice during the discussions, Amanda expressed her disapproval of seemingly random acts of violence. In each case, the boys seemed to condone the violence, although they could not truly rationalize the justification for it.

- Amanda: I don't know why someone would blow up a puppy. (Mike and Ly chuckle). That's very gross and especially when they're like, in a war. But I guess. . .
- Mike: I don't really get into blowing up dogs.
- Amanda: Yeah, but did you blow up frogs and stuff when you were younger? 5

- Mike: Probably, yeah. Firecrackers.  
 Amanda: I don't get why guys do that.  
 Ly: It's fun. (all chuckling)  
 Amanda: Why is that fun? (laughing) To see little airholes?  
 Ly: Maybe they call it entertainment. I don't know. 10

Amanda was very clear that this was masculine behaviour to which she couldn't relate. Ly's insistence that blowing up frogs is "fun", "entertainment", wasn't convincing to her, nor was it convincing to himself – as he seemed to recognize by ending his comments with the uncertainty of stating "I don't know" (line 10).

### Rejecting Balzac

Unlike the group reading *The things they carried*, the group which read *Balzac and the little Chinese seamstress* had almost no critical interrogation of discourses of masculinity. Instead, the way that the boys responded to the text shut down most avenues of critical dialogue.

Ly and Jacob in the *Balzac* group were the most actively negative about the book they read. The plot centres around two boys being re-educated during the Cultural Revolution, their rival love for a local seamstress, and how reading forbidden Western literature instigates a change in perspective for each of the three main characters. Negative evaluations arose three separate times during their first discussion. One instance included the following exchange:

- Jacob: I think – this book is boring.  
 Mai: This book is not boring. This book is really good. (Boys laughing)  
 Ly: Well, we are willing to give it another shot.  
 Jacob: Ly is willing to be bored.  
 Ly: No, I would recommend this book to any girl.

Jacob didn't offer any specific rationale for his dislike at any time in the discussions taped, but Ly insisted that the book was more for girls twice in this opening discussion. Ly appeared to be suggesting that this was not the type of story he deemed appropriately masculine.

The group's second discussion also began with an evaluation. Startlingly, Ly began by announcing that he now liked the book, then quickly undermined that initial statement.

- Ly: I like this book.  
 Jacob: Why?  
 Ly: Cuz I like any book were they're talking about two naked people having sex.  
 Jacob: Say it a little louder why don't you?  
 Mai: Well I think the book is getting better because they're talking more 5  
 about the books and the little seamstress and getting more into the real plot.  
 Jacob: Yes, I agree.  
 Phuan: Me too.  
 Mai: Why do you agree?  
 Jacob: Well, first of all it couldn't get any worse because the first two parts 10  
 suck so bad. So, yeah it is getting better. And it is actually getting  
 some action.

After Ly's sexualized reading, Mai offered a genuine evaluation with examples of how the book improved in the second section, with which Jacob agreed. But when Mai asked Jacob to elaborate on his evaluation, Jacob began by reasserting his negative opinion about the first part. Then he continued by explaining that his sense of improvement came from the story "actually getting some action". This statement could simply be a restatement of Mai's assessment that they had now gotten into the plot of the story, but the connotation of "action" may also parallel Ly's reading of this as a more feminine and therefore "boring" text.

Furthermore, Ly was frustrated by one of the main themes of the novel: the connection between reading literature and personal transformation. Later in this conversation he stated, "This book is retarded. I don't get why people like reading books so much, I hate reading." If reading is seen as a feminine practice (Orellana, 1995; Martino, 1995; Millard, 1997; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Brozo, 2002), then Ly's statement was as much an indictment of the book, as it is an articulation of what constitutes his idea of masculinity.

Causes of the boys' rejection of this text were most likely complex. Both Jacob and Ly consistently completed homework and appeared to have read this book in its entirety and on schedule, so masking a lack of preparedness would not account for their stated dislike. Their vehement rejection of *Balzac and the little Chinese seamstress* may have stemmed in part from the fact that this book was not their first but second choice. As with Ly's earlier complaints about the difficult level of vocabulary, part of his resistance to this story, and reading in general, may stem from the difficulties he had decoding the text. In addition, when they boys spoke about the reasoning behind their disapproval, they intimated that this book about reading and relationships in Communist China was not relevant to their lives, at least in part because it appeared to deal with more a feminine plot and theme. If a text is viewed as irrelevant, it is not likely to be popular (Fiske, 1989). Thus, in this particular case, the group required assistance in making the book relevant, when they could not or would not find an entry into the text themselves. Furthermore, the rejection of this book by two of the group members ensured that the analysis of the text remained too superficial to sustain the type of critical reading that was possible in the other groups.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING AND RESEARCH

### Text selection

The issue of text selection for book clubs seemed to contain a double bind in this particular classroom context. With a majority of all students (and almost all of the boys in this class) choosing to read texts in which the protagonists resembled themselves in terms of both gender and race, the space for critical analysis of such social constructs might be limited in part by the choice element of the book club format. Certainly, books such as *The things they carried* do invite critiques of the dominant discourses of masculinity from within that discourse. But it is also reasonable to expect students to read outside of their own subjectivities. Furthermore, narratives from alternative gender or racial positions might access such a critical perspective more readily.

On the other hand, students' ability to relate a text to their own lives is central to their substantive engagement with the text (Nystrand, 1997; Fiske, 1989). *The things they carried* group discussions about the harsh realities of becoming a soldier, demonstrated how potent a student-directed discussion can be when the students have the benefit of seeing issues relevant to their lives reflected in the text. Part of the failure of the *Balzac* group to achieve any sustained dialogic and critical discussion was likely to have stemmed from the boys' resistance to the text as one which was not relevant to their lives. When Ly and Jacob repeatedly called the book "boring" or "stupid", I suspect it was in part because they could not find a way into the story.

In retrospect, the *Balzac* group required more assistance to help them find windows into this text. Usually, in large-group literature instruction, I try to create pathways into texts for my students. In some cases, it can be a relatively straightforward process, in others it requires more foregrounding. With the *Balzac* group, I made the naïve assumption that learning about another Asian culture would be enough of a hook into this book for three Asian-American students and their white friend. Yet the group never addressed similarities or differences between their cultures and the culture portrayed in the book except in a very superficial or exoticized way.

I can see now that a stronger hook for Ly might have been his intense dislike of communism and concern about social class. Instead, perhaps as a result of the complex socio-economic and cultural positionings affecting his life and this group, this book which upheld reading and sexual love as means to personal transformation was never made accessible to him. The challenging aspect of such an intervention would be to help the group members get into the narrative without infringing on the autonomy of the book club structure. Requiring some of background research into the author, time period, or cultural context early in the reading might be beneficial, particularly with narratives set in less familiar contexts. Perhaps including one or two pre-reading journal topics of relevance to a book's major themes would help more students find pathways into narratives with unfamiliar contexts such as *Balzac's*. Clearly, Martino's (1995) conclusion that "the choice of text is an important factor in opening up possibilities in the classroom for challenging dominant discourses" (p. 211) holds weight. But the context of student choice and student control of the discussions limited the range of texts selected by these book clubs and the ability of at least the *Balzac* group to make the text relevant to their lives without instructor intervention.

## GROUP POSITIONING

Two specific issues seemed to arise in terms of the group interactions in these book clubs:

1. the use of pre-assigned discussion roles; and
2. the isolation of students either by gender or race in groups leading to asymmetrical power relations within three of the four book clubs studied.

The discussion roles initially created by Daniels (2002) were a useful frame to help students get started with their first book clubs. Ideally, it required each student to think specifically about the text and vary their responses appropriately. At the same

time, the roles (particularly in worksheet form) may have the tendency to be used procedurally instead of substantively (Nystrand, 1991; Daniels 2002). The revisions that I began to implement during the semester were substantiated by the students' discussions. The tendency of some groups to present their roles, particularly informative roles such as the summarizer, interrupted the flow of conversation and may be interpreted as hierarchical (Tannen, 1990). In order to help enhance their dialogue and democratize positioning within the group, all students should bring questions to each discussion. Additional instruction on how to write critical questions for discussion may also be necessary.

The second issue which impacted the group dynamics significantly was the isolation of students by either gender and/or race. Such isolations clearly affected both the style and content of the discussions, suggesting that the separation of these two aspects of analysis may have been simplistic. Lewis (2001) found that in some groups, "rather than decentering power...peer-led groups often gave dominant students a position of power" (p. 116). This occurred most acutely with Jacob's role in the *Balzac* group. The fact that Jacob had interpretive authority in the larger classroom context most likely exacerbated the power relations inside the group. But within the book club, as the only white, male, native speaker of English in his group, Jacob was able to achieve and maintain significant control over the discussions, particularly through the use of linguistic dominance in the form of puns, insults and jokes. The fact that the three other group members relinquished much of their interpretive power to Jacob, also speaks to the difficulty that culturally marginalized students may have in asserting their voices in peer-led discussions, even when they are not isolated within groups. Both Amanda and Mai also struggled to get their voices heard in otherwise all-male groups. The examples presented by both groups suggested that isolation of students from marginalized cultural positions might be more likely to result in a loss of interpretive authority. Conversely, isolation of students from more dominant cultural positions might exaggerate those individuals' power within their peer groups. Young (2000) found similar results which suggested that "the success of critical literacy discussions depend...on the local contexts and power relations" (p. 332). Likewise, Evans (1996) found that "the positioning that occurred [in peer literature discussions]...calls into question the assumption that such contexts are equitable places for students to assume ownership of their learning" (p. 201).

Finding solutions to asymmetrical power relations within book clubs presents a particular dilemma. As Evans (1996) posited, "How do we disrupt oppressive positioning without becoming oppressive ourselves?" (p. 201). For an instructor to indicate that a member of a group was acting in a sexist or racist manner would probably mark the end of dialogue in most peer groups. Certainly, teachers should try to anticipate some of the potential problems that might arise in peer groups. Keeping knowledge about individual students as well as classroom contexts in mind during group formation may enable the anticipation of some problems. However, within the context of choice in book clubs, teachers may have difficulty matching students' book requests with a preferable group configuration, particularly if there exists an imbalance in terms of gender or ethnicity in the classroom.

Even identifying unequal distributions of power could prove difficult without closer observation than I was able to achieve here on a daily basis. For example, the *Balzac*



group usually appeared to be having fun and joking around during my short observations of them; it wasn't until I got more significantly into analysis of their transcripts that I noticed the strained quality of their interactions and discussion content. Enlisting outside observers to evaluate groups on occasion might help, but would be cumbersome to organize and might impinge on students' willingness to speak openly. I experimented with pairing groups to evaluate each other (Raphael & McMahon, 1994), and although the students said they were more uncomfortable being observed, if used selectively, this technique might help students start to identify for themselves patterns of interaction that are harmful or beneficial to peer collaboration.

## DISCOURSES ON GENDER

As discussed above, the fact that the group with the most asymmetrical power dynamics also had the least amount of critical discussion suggests that there is a strong correlation behind the group's local context and its ability to engage in critical literacy discussions. In the *Balzac* group, Mai's critical readings of femininity were not taken up by their male counterparts, and instead often drowned out amid a hypersexualized reading of the heroine. Amanda's attempts to critique discourses of femininity in *The things they carried* were only modestly more successful. The experiences of both girls, and their use of journals to further their own critical readings, confirmed Young's (2000) hypothesis that written responses might help "diffuse some of the local power relations when facilitating critical literacy activities" (p. 333).

Despite a more monologic stance toward discourses on femininity, *The things they carried* group was able to interrogate tensions within discourses of the heroic masculine storyline through dialogic interaction within this mixed gender group. Although not without inconsistencies, these boys seemed able to accept some of the complexities and ambiguities which serve to deconstruct more hegemonic discourses of masculinity. These results suggested that while some boys were willing to take-up a critical discourse of masculinity, they did not correspondingly engage in critical discourse on femininity. Girls seemed more willing to assume a critical stance on either, perhaps as a result of their marginalized position within traditional discourse of both masculinity and femininity.

I agree with Davies (1993) and Young (2000) that critical literacy discussions have to begin within one's own gendered experience; thus these boys, with little prior experience with critical literacy discussions, might just be getting started with their explorations of gender constructions, and as such first need to focus on aspects of masculinity. What concerns me is that as seniors in high school, this course was perhaps the last literature-based course many will take. At what point then would they be asked to interrogate discourses of femininity? To assume that this work can be left to college classrooms may serve only to reify certain class-based discourses of gender for non-college-bound students. Critical literacy activities cannot be the sole realm of upper-level courses or college courses; students need to be engaged with these ideas throughout their literacy education.

I also wonder how much of the boys' resistance to critical discourses of femininity is not simply lack of experience, but may relate to socio-cultural factors, such as

opposing discourses of masculinity, race and class. This seems to be another aspect of literacy education where girls might have an advantage over boys. Today, some discourses of femininity recognize the tension between concepts such as female independence and motherhood. The girls reading *The bean trees* and *Kindred* could objectify the more traditional discourses of gender in part because they already felt personally distanced from them. The boys' struggles to do the same may indicate that the discourses available to them regarding diverse concepts of masculinity are still too limited. This creates an aporia in any rationale for use of the book club format. Democratic education requires democratic pedagogies which privilege student choice and control; yet if alternative discourses about gender (or race or class) are not accessible in the world outside the classroom, then there is little chance that the boys will inhabit them in a context where they make the decisions about discussion content. If boys require more provocation and practice to be able to inquire into these issues, then the book club format might not be the ideal context for emerging critical literacy discussions of gender, or any other hegemonic discourses.

In many ways the book club structure fulfilled its promise. It did decentre my role in this classroom and allowed students greater choice and control. Most students indicated that they preferred this format of instruction, most groups demonstrated they were "substantively engaged" (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991), and several groups were able to sustain critical literacy discussions without my intervention. At the same time, I do have reservations about this structure in terms of diversity education. Theoretical democracy is always easier to achieve than actual democracy; some groups displayed more hierarchical interactions than would be permitted in a teacher-led discussion. Finally, when it comes to interrogating the hierarchical discourses of gender or race or class that still dominate society today, it may be too much to ask students to accomplish this task through peer dialogue alone. Even with access to critical theory, students may not be willing or able to deconstruct the discourses that empower themselves, and disadvantage others, without scaffolded and sustained practice of critical literacy in all aspects of their literacy education.

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**APPENDIX A: TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS**

...	interruption
....	segment edited
[ ]	overlapping talk
( )	descriptive terms added by researcher
( ? )	language unclear or inaudible
/	one-second pause
<i>italics</i>	speaker emphasis