



# Discovering the Benefits of a Reading Circle on ESL Literacy Instructors

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Final Report - Internal Research Grant

Discovering the Benefits of a Reading Circle on  
ESL Literacy Instructors

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**March 9, 2010**

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### Abstract

Canada's newest wave of refugees arrives here with little or no previous formal education. Because of this, they do not fit into the regular LINC classes and many schools have formed separate literacy classes for these learners. Since ESL certification involves little or no course work aimed at teaching adults to read and write for the first time, many instructors feel inadequately prepared to work with these learners. The instructors are not confident that what they are doing in the classroom is, indeed, the "right" way to teach ESL literacy and they are requesting specialized professional development aimed at teaching this population. Yet, the literature confirms that there is little available and indicates that, because teaching ESL literacy is so different from teaching mainstream ESL, many ESL literacy instructors feel professionally isolated. The research further recommends that there be time provided for these instructors to interact with each other on a professional level to enable the sharing of classroom ideas. One way to address these issues is through a professional reading circle. This research project initiated the formation of a reading circle for Bow Valley College ESL literacy instructors. The project leader amassed current articles dealing with various aspects of teaching in an ESL literacy classroom. A call was put out within the ESL department of Bow Valley College, asking for interested ESL literacy practitioners to join a reading circle which would meet monthly over the next five months. Ten practitioners formed the reading circle and the group met five times for 1.25 hours to discuss articles, reflect and shared ideas. At the end of the five months, each participant was interviewed. All participants stated that the reading circle was beneficial to their daily teaching and that it provided them with motivation to read relevant literature. Many also reflected that they now have a pool of other literacy practitioners they can turn to for sharing ideas. All agreed it was a positive experience and the discussions provided many concrete classroom ideas. Every member also stated that they wanted to continue being part of a reading circle. All members participated in reflection of their classroom practice at the reading circle meetings. Another finding of this project is that many of the participants played a greater role in presenting workshops after being part of the reading circle. In addition to the stated research goals of resolving professional isolation and building a more reflective practice, the reading circle also built capacity evidenced by these practitioners attending and even presenting literacy related workshops at national and international conferences.

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## **Introduction**

Teaching ESL literacy is a specialized area and, as such, requires different skills than those needed in mainstream ESL. Since ESL certification involves little or no course work aimed at teaching adults to read and write for the first time, many instructors feel inadequately prepared to work with these learners. The instructors are not confident that what they are doing in the classroom is, indeed, the "right" way to teach ESL literacy. Although they are successfully teaching this target group, the instructors doubt their own expertise. Bow Valley College ESL literacy instructors requested specialized professional development aimed at teaching this population. Yet, there little was available. The literature affirmed this void, stating that there few professional development opportunities exist. Moreover, the literature indicated that, because ESL literacy is so different from teaching mainstream ESL, many ESL literacy instructors are professionally isolated. The research recommended that ESL providers allow time for these instructors to interact with each other on a professional level to enable the sharing of classroom ideas.

Through this research grant, the researcher provided a forum for BVC ESL literacy instructors to participate in peer-enabled professional development through a reading circle. The reading circle was a forum for instructors to come together to discuss current literature and reflect on their own practice, building both community and capacity. Ten instructors met, discussed and reflected upon relevant articles focussed on teaching ESL literacy learners.

## **Research Question**

The research question asked in this applied research was: what are the benefits of participating in a reading circle for ESL literacy instructors at Bow Valley College. The researcher wanted to determine if a professional reading circle would lead instructors to a more reflective practice, resulting in an increase in confidence in their practice. In addition, the researcher wanted to determine if a reading circle would lead to a feeling of community among the participants, thus alleviating the feelings of isolation. To address these questions, the researcher facilitated a reading circle where instructors came together to discuss current, relevant literature in ESL literacy and reflect on their own practice by reading, thinking, discussing and then reflecting.

## **Literature Review**

Because ESL literacy is an emerging field, there are few opportunities for specialized professional development. Many of the instructors feel they lack the expertise and wish to improve their skills and knowledge in ESL literacy (Cummings, 2006; Ontario Literacy Coalition, 2007).

Reflective practice and reading circles have been used as professional development with adult educators (Brown, 2001; Vanderstel). Reflective practice allows instructors time to gather information, reflect on their teaching practice and then adapt the new knowledge into their own teaching (Cooke & Roberts, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 1995). Reflexivity is an essential part of professional development "because it can promote insights that are particularly deep, transforming and lasting" (Yates, 2006).

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Reading circles not only enable instructors to keep current with educational issues in a collaborative fashion but also provide a vehicle for reflective practice (Brown, 2001).

A how-to manual for leading an ESL literacy study circle provides some detailed guidelines and reflective ideas for facilitating this type of professional development (Arciszewska-Russo, 2003).

The above illustrates that, while sources for professional development of ESL literacy instruction are few, a proven method for enabling this development is available: peer-enabled professional development through reading circles and reflexive practice.

### **Research Design**

The researcher used qualitative research in the form of a focus group model for the reading circle, in order to investigate participants' experiences and beliefs concerning the articles discussed and their reflections on them.

The participants were Bow Valley College ESL literacy staff (instructors and coordinators) who were recruited through first a brief presentation at a staff meeting by the researcher and then a mass email requesting volunteers. Because of the various teaching schedules within the ESL department, one criteria used in selecting the participants was availability to meet for the reading circle in the late afternoon. This meant that some interested instructors were automatically excluded from participating due to their teaching schedule. In order to build community within the reading circle, the researcher selected only ten participants. The first ten respondents who were willing to commit to meet at the appointed afternoon time slot for all five meetings were selected as the reading circle participants.

The participants were all women between the ages of 25 and 55, working in the ESL department. All were working in various capacities of ESL literacy. Seven participants taught full time in ESL literacy, one taught part-time in ESL literacy, one coordinated special ESL literacy projects and one was a resource teacher who worked individually with various ESL literacy learners. Seven participants were permanent employees and three were casual employees. The casual employees each had a work placement for the duration of the research.

After the participants were selected, the researcher met individually with each participant, explained the process and goal, had them sign a consent form and answered any questions. The researcher set up the five reading circle dates and informed participants of the dates.

The researcher selected classroom-relevant ESL articles for each reading circle and had them photocopied. Two weeks before the first meeting, each participant received a photocopy of the reading for that reading circle. At each meeting thereafter the researcher distributed the article for the next session.

At each of the five sessions, light snacks and drinks were provided. The researcher opened each meeting with one to three guided questions arising from the articles. After the initial five or ten minutes, participants broke down into small groups of two to three and discussed the article and their reflections. The full group then reconvened, to discuss and share their ideas together in a conversational

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atmosphere. The method of read, think, discuss, reflect was used. The researcher asked participants to self-reflect on each particular article and its usefulness to them individually and they were encouraged to share responses if they feel comfortable.

For the fifth and final session, a slightly different approach was used. Instead of a single article for all to read and discuss, the researcher lead a jigsaw approach. Three different articles on a similar theme were selected and copied, each article on a different coloured paper. The group was divided into smaller groups of three and four participants (the researcher included herself) and each group was given a different article to read. Articles were distributed at the end of the fourth session. At the fifth session, participants met with the others who had read the same article as them, and they discussed and reflected on it together. Then, half way through the session, the researcher regrouped everyone so that each group now had one or two people representing each article. They each then told described their article and listened to the descriptions of the other two articles. This way, as a group, they learned about three articles without the burden of reading them all. At the end of the session, copies of each article were available for all participants.

After each reading circle, the researcher wrote a few notes on the discussion and emerging themes.

At the end of the five sessions, the researcher met individually with each participant and asked them six open ended questions about their thoughts on the reading circle. The researcher used a form to record each participant's responses.

### **Research Findings**

The researcher met with the participants and led the five reading circles. Each session was well attended with near perfect attendance. (One participant was unable to attend the final session due to medical reasons.) At each session, all participants had read the articles and joined in the discussions fully.

The researcher recorded comments for each session. Upon analysis, the comments were primarily content-based comments relating to classroom application and ideas for putting theory into practice. Participants shared ideas on practical ways to incorporate the research into practice. As well, the participants reflected on specifics of what had happened in their classrooms that day or week and shared ideas on teaching practices. Many of the reflections were based on how they might incorporate the ideas of the articles' into their practice in the future; other reflections focused on things that they did in the classroom already. Thus the reading circle led to both an inspiration of new ideas and an affirmation of things already done well.

The small number of participants, all sharing an interest in the same ESL literacy learners, facilitated an easy flow of conversation around each article. Conversations were lively and each participant was allowed to contribute.

After the final reading circle session, the researcher met individually with the participants and asked them questions about the reading circle and its implications as a practitioner. One participant was unavailable to meet with the researcher due to scheduling conflicts and annual leave. The remaining nine met with the researcher and answered the questions. The questions and responses are discussed below.

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### **In what ways did the reading circle influence you as a practitioner?**

Participants stated repeatedly that they now had more ideas to put into immediate practice in their classroom. They were enthusiastic about trying out the ideas they read and talked about. One person mentioned that they now know what others, both their colleagues and those writing the articles, are doing in the classroom. One stated that the reading circle provided "real life examples that I want to put to use and will use in the classroom." Another stated that she was excited after reading and talking about the articles.

### **Did the reading circle result in any changes in your practice? If so, what changes did it make?**

While two participants said the reading circle did not result in any changes in their practice, others stated that it helped them try new ideas which were presented in the discussions and articles. One stated that it increased her knowledge base of the skills of her colleagues. One specified that she now incorporates much more review in her classroom based on discussions from the reading circle.

### **What part of the reading circle was most meaningful to you and why?**

Seven participants felt that getting together with co-workers and sharing teaching ideas was the most meaningful part of the reading circle. They stated that the nature of their jobs allowed little time for interaction with other instructors to simply discuss teaching strategies and share ideas. The reading circle provided such a forum. Five participants identified reading articles as the most meaningful. They liked the link between theory and practice. One participant stated that she could see the "links between what I do in the classroom and what others, both participants and in the articles, do in the classroom."

### **What part of the reading circle was the least meaningful or helpful to you?**

Only one participant made a comment for this question stating that she "took away something each time so there was no least meaningful."

### **What could we do differently in the future?**

Most of the comments in this section were related to the logistics of meeting. Three participants suggested an earlier meeting time would be easier for them personally. Others suggested that the reading circle continue throughout the year, rather than end with this research project. Two participants suggested the reading circle be opened up to non literacy practitioners for a sharing of ideas across the department. Two further suggested the reading circle do more jigsaw style activities as they learned so much more at that session. There were three comments centred around the use of the computer. One suggestion was to have electronic, rather than paper, copies of the articles sent out and the others were to have an online or video conferencing meetings instead of face-to-face.

### **What else do you want to tell me about the experience?**

Most of the comments in this section were positive, praising the experience and encouraging the reading circle to continue after the research grant finished. General comments stated the number of participants was ideal, that the session was well facilitated and that the sessions were "informal enough to encourage conversation, yet still (be) professional." Two participants stated that the variety of participants - experienced instructors, new instructors and non-instructors- enriched the discussions. One mentioned that she "was validated and that felt good." Another

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stated that it was an "excellent way to grow and get together." A final suggestion was that there be a goal after reading and discussing, such as journaling individually.

### **Other comments**

Here the participants simply applauded the process. They stated that it was nice to get together with other literacy practitioners and the reading circle provided a "warm conducive atmosphere." One stated that research isn't something she usually does in her free time, yet it was nice to read the articles.

In conclusion, the participants all gained knowledge and confidence from attending the reading circle. By becoming more current in the literature, they were able to reflect on their practice and share their ideas with their fellow colleagues. This led to community building within the group, thus resolving the feelings of professional isolation. Although the participants did not all clearly articulate that they were more confident in their classroom practice, they all agreed that they learned a great deal and that the time to reflect in the reading circle was helpful.

Another unexpected finding of this project is that nine of the ten participants chose to attend at least one of the two upcoming literacy-focused national and international conferences. Furthermore, three of the reading circle members presented literacy workshops at these conferences which focussed on literacy. Five reading circle participants lead literacy workshops within the Bow Valley College ESL department within six months of the reading circle's conclusion. In addition to the stated research goals of resolving professional isolation and building a more reflective practice, the reading circle also built capacity evidenced by these practitioners attending and even presenting literacy related workshops, within the college as well as at national and international conferences.

### **Recommendation and Implications**

Based on the positive feedback from the participants, the researcher recommends that reading circle continue as a method of professional development in ESL literacy. The reading circle is a simple, effective and inexpensive way to enable ESL literacy practitioners to stay current in their field and form a community of practitioners. Moreover, the reading circle can be a forum for capacity building, creating confident instructors who act as leaders in workshops both internally and externally to the ESL department.

Being a member of a reading circle is very rewarding but it is also very time consuming. When management recognizes reading circle participation as valuable professional development, the entire organization benefits. Therefore, it is recommended that the reading circle have the full support of the department. Finding time and space for a reading circle, both mental and physical, is challenging and a supportive management makes this go more smoothly. The practitioners who participate gain a sense of community and keep current in their field. Learners get instructors who are knowledgeable and try new techniques. Management gets practitioners who are more confident in their teachings and may take on added leadership roles.

At Bow Valley College the ESL department teaches in three shifts, morning, afternoon and full day. This leads to the challenge of scheduling the reading circle



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meetings to optimize participation. This difficulty was mentioned in the feedback; practitioners find it tiring to attend late afternoon reading circle meetings when they arrive very early in the morning. One possible solution requiring management support is having classes shortened by half an hour on the days the reading circle take place. This would enable the practitioners to meet over the various lunch hours of the three different shifts. As well as showing support to the participants by allowing them thirty minutes of leave time to attend to their professional development, it would also allow a different set of practitioners to participate in the reading circle, those who teach in the afternoons. The model of a reading circle as professional development is a simple one which is easy and inexpensive to organize and sustain.

The ESL literacy reading circle supports the professional development goals of BVC and conforms to the teaching and learning mandate by providing opportunities to expand on best practices in ESL literacy, a part of foundational learning. It could lead to future evidence-based decision making around reading circles as a permanent feature of the ESL department's professional development or recommendations of other professional development.

Finally, this model of a reading circle as professional development could be used for other areas within Bow Valley College. For instance, a math reading circle could be formed where math instructors meet and stay current within their field. The model can be shaped to be whatever it needs to be.

### **Conclusions**

Conducting this research on ESL reading circles led me to be a more reflective instructor. It was a very rewarding project and from it, I developed a sense of community in my workplace, as well as in the ESL literacy instructors' community in general.

In order to share my expertise in the benefits of a reading circle as professional development, I attended three conferences and presented at each. I presented workshops at TESL Canada and TESL Ontario and a poster session at LESLLA, an international second language literacy conference. I also presented a workshop within the ESL department modelling a reading circle. In addition, I presented a workshop on how to set up a reading circle to the Academic Foundations Department at Bow Valley College where a practitioner has now taken it on herself to lead an interdepartmental reading circle focussed on the unique needs of ESL learners in the mainstream classroom.

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