

Similarities and differences between book clubs and dialogic literary gatherings

Abstract

Two practices of innovative reading have recently gained tremendous popularity in Spain, particularly in terms of the didactic aspect of increasing reading literacy and language comprehension: book clubs and literary gatherings. Based on the results of an ethnographic study with participatory observation and interviews, the author illustrates the differences and specific potentials of both practices both for the school-based form and in other social settings. A direct comparison reveals that each of the two forms follows a different paradigm, and can thus compensate for different preconditions or, respectively, promote different skills.

1 Introduction

This paper will focus on two reading practices: book clubs and dialogic literary gatherings, which have seen an extraordinary growth. However, scientific research on this field in Spain differs from the status of international studies, as publications on book clubs, which began in the 1990s, are scarce and focus mainly on how they have been promoted¹.

In contrast, some studies have been published in Spain on dialogic literary gatherings². In any event, to date there has been no research that has focused on the similarities and differences between book clubs and dialogical literary gatherings, both in terms of their theoretical foundations and their practices. Therefore, this bears further investigation in order to clarify how these two innovative strategies operate.

Book clubs and dialogical literary gatherings have at least six similarities that are key to the international recognition of their success³:

1 NAVARRO/YUBERO 2004, DOMINGO/SOLA 2005, ARANDA/GALINDO 2009, MORAL/ARBE 2013, ÁLVAREZ 2016, ÁLVAREZ/PASCUAL 2013, 2014.

2 VALLS et al. 2008, PULIDO/ZEPA 2010, SERRANO et al. 2010, FLECHA et al. 2013.

3 VALLS et al. 2008, ARANDA/GALINDO 2009, DUNCAN 2012, REED/VAUGHN 2012, LYONS/RAY 2014.

1. People join a book club or a literary gathering freely, and they may register or deregister as they wish.
2. No participants are rejected or discriminated against because of sex, age, culture, academic background, etc.
3. Whether or not reading is a habit previously acquired by participants, it is central and takes place on an individual basis.
4. After the individual reading, a group discussion is held that seeks to involve participants in an egalitarian and democratic way. To facilitate this, group members usually sit in a circle where they can see each other's faces.
5. They can take place in all kinds of centres: cultural associations, libraries, schools, prisons, nursing homes, community centres, women's groups, companies, etc.
6. They can be carried out with children, young people and adults, with slight variations, which depending on the cases, can cause problems regarding point 1. For example, in schools the dialogical literary gathering usually takes place during the Spanish Language and Literature class, which means that those taking part cannot opt out.

However, it is also possible to identify differences between both practices, mainly due to their origins. The first book clubs began in English-speaking countries during the Victorian period, and due to their success, the practice spread to other countries, but it did not reach Spain until the mid-1980s, first in public libraries and years later in social, educational and cultural centres of all kinds, which imitated this model. At first, they were only addressed to an adult audience and narrative reading predominated, but gradually they started to involve children and young people in libraries and schools that were innovative in terms of reading⁴. They have now become diversified, and in some cases book clubs are organised by specific literary genres (comics, black novels, poetry), or to work on specific themes, both in face-to-face and virtual formats⁵. Book clubs are networks that are usually, but not always, comprised of consumers of literature, who meet periodically to discuss all kinds of literary works proposed either by the participants or by the coordinator.

Dialogic literary gatherings began in the early 1980s in Spain at an adult education centre, as part of a process of egalitarian and democratic change implemented by the centre and its community. It stemmed from the efforts of community organisations, associations and groups, teaching practitioners and students, and experimented with practices that would foment learning, participation, motivation and a positive coexistence. Dialogic literary gatherings are

4 ÁLVAREZ/PASCUAL 2013, 2014.

5 DOMINGO/SOLA 2005.

based on Freire's concept of dialogicity⁶ and have given rise to another concept, that of 'dialogic reading', which relies on the seven principles of dialogic learning: egalitarian dialogue, cultural intelligence, transformation, instrumental dimension, creation of meaning, solidarity and the equality of differences. From this approach, reading is the intersubjective process of appropriating a text by moving to more profound interpretations, critically reflecting on the text and its context, and intensifying reading comprehension through interaction with others, thus opening up possibilities for the transformation of the individual as a reader and as an individual in the world⁷. Literary gathering members read classic works of universal literature, divided into chapters and hold a (usually weekly) meeting aimed at their discussion.

Despite the fact that the two strategies described have led to significant results in improving reading comprehension and fostering a taste for reading and reading habit in childhood / adulthood, they have not yet become widespread in all educational and social organisations, where many gaps exist in their common and differentiating features.

2 Methodological framework

This paper presents the results of an ethnographic study that compares how different book clubs and dialogical literary gatherings operate in Spain and Brazil, with children and adults, respectively, from the perspective of reading innovation in social and educational organisations.

2.1 Aim

The aim of the study is to identify the similarities and differences between a book club and a dialogic literary gathering within an organisation (school, community centre, library, prison, women's association, etc.). Based on this general aim, the study has the following specific objectives:

- (1) To become involved in the discussions in different book clubs and dialogical literary gatherings in order to observe them from an ethnographic perspective, to audio-record (if possible), and note the most prominent discussions and the style of moderation carried out.

6 FREIRE 1975.

7 VALLS et al. 2008.

- (2) To discover the opinion of key informants in book clubs and dialogical literary gatherings and so investigate further their similarities and differences.
- (3) To develop a system to categorise the similarities and discrepancies between book clubs and dialogical literary gatherings.

2.2 Method and model

The research method employed was the case study⁸, with the use of an ethnographic model⁹. The ultimate objective of the case studies was to discover relevant units of analysis in order to investigate in depth at the ‘micro’ level and thus provide ideas to help to understand and enhance specific realities. In Ethnography, it is considered that in order to have a good knowledge of a given reality, it is necessary to experience it as an actual member of the community. To this end, I participated in different dialogic literary gatherings and book club meetings in different settings as a participant, with a view to becoming closer to the coordinators and participants and investigating these reading practices further.

2.3 Procedure and participants

The methodology included participant observation of various meetings of book clubs and dialogic literary gatherings in Spain and Brazil, both in schools and other social organisations, as well as interviews with key informants (coordinators and participants), and the circumstances described below were observed.

A total of eighty-two meetings were attended (forty-eight in book clubs and thirty-four in dialogic literary gatherings). Wherever possible, the interactions of the members were audio-recorded and later transcribed. Where this was not possible, field notes were taken on the discussions.

In addition, a total of thirty interviews were conducted (with seven coordinators of book clubs and twelve participants in book clubs, and four coordinators of, and seven participants in, dialogical literary gatherings). The style of the interviews varied; some were more in depth, to achieve triangulation and saturation of data that had been recorded and/or transcribed, and others were more informal, depending on the situation.

8 STAKE 2005.

9 HAMMERSLEY/ATKINSON 2007.

Table 1: Book clubs and dialogic literary gatherings under study.

	Managing organisation and location	Observation	Interviews
Book club	<i>State school (Asturias, Spain)</i>	Participated in a student book club for three terms (eighteen meetings)	Interviewed the coordinator and two participants
	<i>State school (Asturias, Spain)</i>	Participated in a family book club for two terms (thirteen meetings)	Interviewed the coordinator and two participants
	<i>Publicly-funded private school (centro Concertado) (Cantabria, Spain)</i>	Participated in a student book club for one term (six meetings)	Interviewed one coordinator and six participants
	<i>University (Cantabria, Spain)</i>	Participated in one meeting	
	<i>Municipal Public Library (Cantabria, Spain)</i>	Participated in six meetings	Interviewed the coordinator and two participants
	<i>Community Centre (Cantabria, Spain)</i>	Participated in one meeting	Interviewed the coordinator
	<i>Crowd-funded bookshop (Cantabria, Spain)</i>	Participated in one meeting	
	<i>Central Public Library (Cantabria, Spain)</i>	Participated in one meeting	Interviewed the coordinator
	<i>Private Group (Cantabria, Spain)</i>	Participated in one meeting	Interviewed the coordinator
Dialogic literary gatherings	<i>State School (Cantabria, Spain)</i>	Participated in one meeting	Interviewed the coordinator
	<i>State School (Cantabria, Spain)</i>	Participated in eleven meetings	Interviewed the coordinator
	<i>State school (São Carlos, Brazil)</i>	Participated in three meetings	Interviewed the coordinator
	<i>Adult Education Centre (Catalonia, Spain)</i>	Participated in one meeting	Interviewed the coordinator and one participant
	<i>Adult Education Centre (São Carlos, Brazil)</i>	Participated in one meeting	
	<i>Municipal Public Library (São Carlos, Brazil)</i>	Participated in one meeting	
	<i>Research Group Seminar. Pedagogical gathering (Catalonia, Spain)</i>	Participated in one meeting	
	<i>University. Pedagogical gathering (Cantabria, Spain)</i>	Participated for two terms (fourteen meetings)	Interviewed six participants
	<i>Teachers' seminar. Pedagogical gathering (Cantabria, Spain)</i>	Participated in a meeting	

2.4 Data analysis

Once the information had been collected, the qualitative data was organised and analysed following content analysis guidelines, given the need to ascertain—through ethnographic analysis—how these two innovative practices operated, and the participants' points of view as key players in their development.

3 Results

The results show that book clubs and dialogic literary gatherings differ in eight significant aspects, in addition to their origin, as described in the theoretical framework. They have been grouped in pairs in order to better account for them: (1) participants and timelines, (2) purpose and variants, (3) coordinator(s) and moderation, and (4) literary works and their selection.

3.1 Participants and timelines

The participants in the literary gatherings had very different reading levels, predominantly belonging to excluded social groups without a consistent reading habit. However, book clubs usually involved adults with a university degree and a high reading level, who had developed the habit of reading to a certain extent. In the case of children's clubs, those who had a better predisposition towards reading tended to join.

This difference in the profile of users is related to the fact that book clubs have grown mostly under the auspices of libraries, whereas literary gatherings started in adult education centres. In both groups, heterogeneity among the participants was seen in a good light.

In the clubs, there are usually monthly meetings where the whole book is discussed (or half of it, if it is very long, such as *The Cavern* by Saramago), while in dialogic literary gatherings a meeting is held—usually weekly—with the aim of discussing a specific number of pages previously determined by the group (one chapter, twenty pages, etc.). In a dialogic literary gathering, according to the principles of solidarity and egalitarian dialogue, the work is fragmented into as many parts as the group feel is needed to make it accessible to all participants (based on reasoned arguments).

The meetings of the members of a club and a gathering usually last between one and two hours, as decided by the groups. Meetings are aimed at the discussion and in-depth understanding of the book being read. Each person's interpretation based on their experience is of interest. Usually, the duration of the

club or meeting is agreed beforehand, and if it is not, it is negotiated during the meeting.

School book clubs tend to be held after school hours, as an additional activity offered by the school for those who want to attend. Conversely, dialogic literary gatherings usually take place during school hours, normally in the Spanish Language and Literature class, and therefore they are mandatory.

3.2 Purpose and variants

The purpose of both clubs and gatherings is similar: to enjoy reading in one's leisure time and to take part in literary debates, sharing interpretations about reading, learning, improving language skills, and so on. In short, they are intended to construct knowledge collectively. In both literary gatherings and book club meetings participants discuss personal experiences related to literary ones, question the behaviour of the protagonists, review the most important passages in the eyes of readers, analyse the language and the literary strategies used by the author, and provide thoughts and reflections, thus generating a rich and profound exchange between the participants.

Due to the different profiles of the participants and the different formats that book clubs and literary gatherings often adopt, book clubs assign a greater role to literature and critically analyse the work from an expert point of view, thus generating unequal interventions (in relation to academic intelligence). In contrast, the aim of the gatherings is to improve self-esteem and to learn from others, and all interventions are considered equally valuable due to the principle of cultural intelligence.

Different variants have emerged in book clubs in line with their different purposes, organised by specific literary genres (comics, black novels, poetry) or intended to discuss the work of particular authors, periods or topics (Shakespeare, the Civil War, etc.), both in face-to-face and in virtual formats.

There have been no variants in literary gatherings, but their method of operation has been transferred to other fields. There are now dialogical pedagogical gatherings (where a classic educational book is read), dialogical musical gatherings (where a classical composition is heard), dialogic curricular gatherings (students read the various topics in the classroom and discuss what they have and have not understood, and share their views on the subject), and dialogical gatherings on the arts (where a classic work of art is examined). Sometimes students in classrooms from different schools have held dialogic gatherings by the use of video conferencing.

3.3 Coordinator(s) and moderation

In book clubs, there must be at least one coordinator who is responsible for the management of the group, including booking the meeting place, selecting the works to be discussed (although there are cases in which the books are chosen by the participants), keeping the agenda of meetings, allocating turns to speak on the day of the meeting, updating the club's website if there is one, etc. The coordinator is usually an expert in literature and/or working with groups of people, and book club members often give authority to the coordinator within the group. This is sometimes used by the coordinator to introduce the author or the work to be studied to the group at the beginning of the session.

In dialogic literary gatherings, there is also a person who is in charge of moderating the group, but this task may rotate among the different participants, so it does not need to be the same person in every meeting. When it comes to discussing the books, the moderator is just another member and abides by the same rules as the rest of the group. The way to approach a particular reading in a gathering and the task of the moderator are clear: people ask to speak in turns and highlight a paragraph, and the moderator notes who they are. The first person is allowed to speak, highlights an idea that is read with the book in hand, indicating the page and paragraph, and discusses it. After this, the coordinator asks if anyone wants to comment on what the first speaker said, generating a new exchange of views. The coordinator allows the next person to speak and the process is repeated. The person who moderates turn-taking makes a note as participants state they wish to speak. This is a transparent process whereby respect pervades the meetings, allowing those who wish to speak to do so in order, thus avoiding interventions overlapping between the various participants. Good communication is achieved, which promotes learning and discussion based on arguments. This is something that can be missing from some book club meetings, because at times two people speak at a time, or turn the debate into a personal argument, making moderation difficult. In addition, a principle of egalitarian dialogue holds sway in literary gatherings, which means that preference will be given to the people who wish to speak but have intervened less. However, when there are literary gatherings in younger students' classrooms, the coordinator of the literary gathering is logically the teacher, although it could be a student in the class.

3.4 Literary works and their selection

In book clubs, the books are usually selected by the coordinator and the way of acquiring them varies from one club to another. Most of the clubs select books that are held in libraries, whereas in others the members buy their book, and in others they read them on-screen through e-books after downloading individual copies.

All kinds of books are read in the clubs: classical, current, best-sellers, etc. And although different kinds of genres are read, the narrative genre usually dominates, as the library collections used for book clubs usually have this limitation. It is generally considered that the more variety there is in the readings proposed, the more quality the book club has, because participants will have more opportunities to become acquainted with interesting books. In school book clubs, a bit of everything tends to be read, and participants emphatically value the opportunity that the club gives them to read books that they would not have read by themselves.

In dialogic literary gatherings, only universal classics are read, and these are selected by the participants after a process in which they submit reasoned proposals, after which the group reaches a consensus (not by voting), taking on board the best arguments provided. This may seem a limitation, but it is done for an important reason: why read all kinds of books if there is a corpus of literary works considered to be the best of all time?¹⁰ Dialogic literary gatherings operate in such a way that they ensure that everyone can read these books (which are often judged as being 'hard'), as they are broken down into small parts which are then discussed at the meetings. In literary gatherings, be they for adults or children, people buy their own book or borrow it from a library.

In school gatherings, children's classics (authors such as Andersen or Verne) or adapted adult universal classics (*The Odyssey*, *Don Quixote*, *Romeo and Juliet*, etc.) are often chosen because they are an apt vehicle for in-depth debates, given the large number of values, behaviours, attitudes, and ways of thinking and acting that occur in this type of books.

3.5 Taking stock

The results highlight a key aspect: behind each of these two practices there is an innovation paradigm in reading which cannot be ignored by the organisations that intend to promote them. Both currently present opportunities and ways of

¹⁰ CALVIN 1993.

working that are of great interest and render significant improvements. Taking stock of the results, the following can be stated:

- Book clubs are based on a more vertical and expert model than literary gatherings, which try to use a more egalitarian and democratic model.
- The meeting timeframes in both cases are flexible and adaptable to the needs of the group.
- Academic intelligence is particularly valued in book clubs, while cultural intelligence is valued in the dialogic literary gatherings.
- Debates are moderated according to clear rules that are well-known to all members in dialogic literary gatherings (asking to speak, turn-taking, etc.), in order to ensure group attention and respect for all opinions and arguments at all times. This could be improved in book clubs.
- In book clubs, all types of books can be read, while dialogic literary gatherings are limited to universal classics.
- The methodology of dialogic literary gatherings is more open and has greater organisational opportunities than book clubs, as an expert is not required, thanks to the principles of dialogic learning on which they are based. The procedure is clearer and more transparent than in book clubs, which makes it easy for any member of the group to moderate the meeting, and for everyone to be aware of and follow the basic rules that ensure all participate satisfactorily in the debates.
- Book clubs have both face-to-face and online variants (genres, authors, etc.).

4 Conclusions

Depending on the profile of the social organisation, on the profile of the participants and on the interests pursued, the format that is most stimulating to them should be chosen: either book clubs or literary gatherings. Both models, by combining individual reading with the group's verbal discussion of the book, help to achieve the threefold challenge of innovation in reading: to foster reading comprehension, to promote a taste for reading, and to develop the habit of reading¹¹.

Readers, when participating in a book club meeting or in a dialogic literary gathering, change their starting point and experience some internal growth. This takes place by reading the book, sharing their interpretations about it, reflecting on the work and becoming involved in a shared reading process, followed by another and then another, so that their reading comprehension, taste for reading and reading habits are enhanced, given the success of both strategies as evidenced

¹¹ AVCI/YUKSEL 2011, GRITTER 2011, REED/VAUGHN 2012.

by international research¹². On this point, it would be possible to differentiate between clubs and gatherings in point 4 ('interpretations on the work are shared'). In book clubs, given that a 'literary expert' is usually present, readers see their reading enhanced on two levels: the egalitarian one between readers, and one resulting from the expert or experts on the book, the author or the period, which can give rise to types of learning that may not arise in dialogical literary gatherings¹³.

As mentioned in the theoretical framework section, book clubs and dialogical literary gatherings have at least six points in common that are key factors in the international recognition of their success¹⁴. However, they differ significantly in the eight categories that were examined in the results section: participants, timelines, purpose, variants, coordination, moderation, books and their selection. For this reason, in any organisation that seeks to implement a process of innovation or improvement, a model must be chosen (with all this implies) to try to develop the process consistently and having full awareness of the reasons behind each decision at all times.

However, even if one model is chosen at a certain time and the other is discarded, this does not mean that the former is incompatible with the latter. In other words, establishing a book club or several is not incompatible with setting up one or more dialogical literary gatherings within the same institution. Rather, the opposite is true: these models can complement each other, contributing to innovation in reading. However, launching a book club or literary gathering requires some knowledge and effort at the outset and, therefore, it is advisable to be clear about their differences regarding participants, timelines, purpose, variants, coordination, moderation, books and their selection when the decision-making process takes place.

Both models contribute to innovation in reading in the social organisations where they occur, as the literature has shown, and it is urgent that more and more institutions become involved in promoting innovation processes to improve reading comprehension, the taste for reading and the reading habits of children and adults, whether based on one model or the other.

12 VALLS et al. 2008, ARANDA/GALINDO 2009, PULIDO/ZEPA 2010, SERRANO et al. 2010, BEACH/YUSSEN 2011, DUNCAN 2012, FLECHA et al. 2013, ÁLVAREZ/PASCUAL 2013, 2014, LYONS/RAY 2014.

13 ARANDA/GALINDO 2009.

14 DUNCAN 2012, REED/VAUGHN 2012, LYONS/RAY 2014.

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