

Encouraging independent reading with ambience: The Book Bistro in middle and secondary school classes

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Creating a bistro setting, in which students can discuss their self-selected reading, promotes reading and interaction among adolescent students.

One day, over a cup of cappuccino at our favorite coffee shop, seventh-grade language arts teacher Kim was complaining to me (Wendy Kasten) about how much her students and their parents hated the computerized independent reading system her school district had purchased and mandated. Kim's students reported being in tears over their inability to correctly answer the detailed questions on the books, even when they had read and enjoyed the selection. Students complained that often they could not find the books they most wanted to read on the list provided by the publisher of the program, and that kids were cheating right and left, giving out their passwords and taking tests for one another. Kim was hearing from her students that they *hated* independent reading because of this program.

As Kim's faculty advisor and friend, I felt that we needed to come up with something better for Kim's classroom to make independent reading meaningful and enjoyable. I met with my new graduate assistant, Lori Wilfong, and we came up

with the idea for Book Bistro. "Suppose," we mused, "independent reading was more like our favorite bookstore with a café, and we could linger over favorite books and share them with others?"

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To engage students, the strategy would need to be personally satisfying and fun. To satisfy Kim's school, it would have to be accountable; she'd need to know the kids really read the books. To be practical, the strategy would also have to be easy to manage for a teacher who saw more than 120 students per day and had to monitor everyone's reading. To be consistent with our goals as literacy educators, it would have to promote enjoyable independent reading. After all, as literacy educators, we have *two* goals. The first is to teach our students to read. The second is to teach our students to *want to read*. The latter is the more challenging.

In this article, we make a case for devoting time to independent reading in settings with adolescents. We will describe the strategy of Book Bistro and how it is consistent with what we know about effective practice to meet the needs of adolescents. Then, we will describe an action research study that tested Book Bistro and describe Kim's implementation and field testing in her classroom. Last, we will share our findings, conclusions, and thoughts for further research.

Creating lifelong readers from adolescents

Our goal as educators is to create lifelong readers, and so we must ask ourselves how to accomplish such a goal. We know that people gravitate toward activities when they believe they are good at them and see themselves in certain positive roles. When we raise students to see themselves as readers, they will more likely pursue reading on their own.

Smith and Wilhelm (2004) and Alvermann (2001) used the notion of reading identities. In other words, to create lifelong readers, individuals must see themselves as competent readers and understand that their reading identity must reach beyond the classroom.

Adolescents are quick to judge things in school as related or unrelated to their lives. Often things associated with school literacy are not seen as relevant by adolescents. As a consequence, teens are more likely to reject school tasks and reading along with them. Our youths need to see literacy as personally relevant and having substance for their lives. When they see literacy as useful and fulfilling, they are more likely to identify themselves as readers and to choose to read (Hinchman, Alvermann, Boyd, Brozo, & Vacca, 2004; Wilhelm, 2001). The Book Bistro strategy does not look like a typical school literacy task. By using a café setting like those found outside of school, we hoped Book Bistro would mimic a real-life setting for books.

Independent reading is critical

Independent reading is an important aspect of any balanced literacy program (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001; McLaughlin, 2003). Consistent opportunities for independent reading help build fluency in readers and help develop reader confidence toward increasingly sophisticated books (Clay, 1991; Fielding, Wilson, & Anderson, 1986; Taylor, Graves, & Van den Broek, 2000). Encouraging reading in school becomes especially critical in middle grades and above because reports show

students in these age groups read less on their own than their elementary peers (Goodman, 1996; Tunnell, Calder, & Phaup, 1991).

Independent reading can occur at home or in school, and the payoffs are equally powerful. Students who read at home averaged 25 points higher on the 1992 and 1994 National Assessment of Education Progress tests of reading achievement than those who did not (Goodman, 1996).

Brozo and Hargis (2003) reminded us that students need opportunities for sustained reading in order to grow in their skills and vocabulary. The less time they read, the less growth we observe. More time spent reading translates to increased achievement. Increased achievement in grade-point averages has been correlated to college students who read more for pleasure during summer breaks. College students read magazines most often, with novels—specifically mystery or horror novels—taking a strong second place (Gallik, 1999).

Book Bistro and independent reading

As we have hinted, Book Bistro is an independent reading strategy for encouraging students to read books on their own, bring books to class for a scheduled event, and linger over books in a café atmosphere. It was built around the “poetry café” idea—a now-popular strategy where students meet to discuss and read poetry together. Poetry café honors student choice, promotes the enjoyment of poetry read aloud, and has no other instructional agendas, allowing for aesthetic appreciation.

Book Bistro uses fiction and nonfiction in the same relaxed atmosphere. Most teachers add ambience to the once-per-month event by bringing in tablecloths, candles, or centerpieces for the tables and arranging for light refreshments. Students arrive with a self-selected book they have recently read and are prepared to share it with a small group of students.

In most cases, teachers ask which books students will be sharing in order to arrange groups.

By putting students together with others whose books may have something in common, a teacher can help ensure each group has individuals who can enthuse one another. Other criteria for grouping students are always up to a teacher's discretion. For example, teachers will typically make certain the mix of individuals will result in each group having someone who will help carry a discussion. Sometimes teachers might want to rearrange their groups in order to expose students to different authors or genres.

For accountability, the teacher provides each student with a three-part form, like a trifold brochure; the middle of the form is filled in by the student about the book they are presenting—including the bibliographic information and other key details. The other two parts of the form are identical to each other and are used in peer evaluation. Each student fills out the side panels of his or her form for the student sitting to the left and for the student to the right. In this way, each reader assesses two other students. Then, these forms are separated into three parts and collected for inclusion in each student's independent reading file, creating a lasting reading record. Teachers using this strategy believed that through the peer evaluation sheets, they could be fairly certain that various students read conscientiously and were well prepared for the Book Bistro event.

Theory into practice

Book Bistro implements the best of what our field knows about encouraging independent reading. First, Book Bistro uses self-selected books that students enjoy reading. Student choice is a critical factor in encouraging student motivation to read (Allen, 2000; Allington, 2002; Conniff, 1993; Fountas & Pinnell, 2001; Gambrell, Codling, & Palmer, 1996; Gambrell & Marinak, 1997; Schooley, 1994; Shapiro & White, 1991; Thames & Reeves, 1994). Students need to be able to choose what they read at least some of the time, and especially until they are firmly and unshakably hooked on reading. In order for us to achieve our literacy-educator goals, students must

fall in love with the stuff of books. This happens when students discover books they care about and find themselves in, books that are in harmony with their interests.

Second, Book Bistro capitalizes on using student discussion to encourage reading. Researchers know that student talk is a primary way that students become motivated to read (Adler, Rougle, Kaiser, & Caughlan, 2004; Allington, 2002; Au, Carroll, & Scheu, 1997; Conniff, 1993; Gambrell & Almasi, 1996; Gambrell et al., 1996; Kasten, Kristo, & McClure, 2005; Manning & Manning, 1984). As students share and discuss books, they tend to become interested in what peers have read.

Discussion should include many voices and be a true interaction among peers. Someone sharing a book he or she recently enjoyed communicates reading enthusiasm, which is contagious. Discussion among peers can change student perceptions of a book, causing students to believe it is easier to read or to consider a particular title or new genre. Many adults can relate to this notion because they have found books they read and enjoyed from the comments and recommendations of friends. Studies of the characteristics of good readers show that proficient readers talk about favorite books with others and choose books recommended by friends (Conniff, 1993; Gambrell, 1996; Smith & Connolly, 2002).

Book Bistro does not look like typical school literacy strategies that adolescent readers are known to reject. Because it is more closely aligned with what adult readers often do—tell their friends about the books they have been reading—we believe that adolescents are less likely to see this strategy as irrelevant to their lives. Table 1 summarizes the alignment between research and Book Bistro as a strategy.

Action research and field testing

In order to explore this idea in the field, Lori designed an action research study using a ninth-grade

Table 1
Research and Book Bistro alignment

Research	Accounted for in Book Bistro
Reading should be literature based with other curricula; readers need choices in their reading material (Schooley, 1994; Shapiro & White, 1991; Thames & Reeves, 1994).	Students are encouraged to self-select books that reflect their interests and reading level.
Cross-aged tutoring is beneficial to both parties and helps build positive attitudes and confidence in reading (Drake, 1993; Juel, 1991; Leland & Fitzpatrick, 1994; Teale & Labbo, 1990).	The Book Bistro is easily adapted to multiple grade or age participation.
Cooperative learning in reading activities is effective and creates enthusiasm for reading (Davidson & Worsham, 1992).	The Book Bistro uses small groups of students, brought together by the type of book they read.
Prior experiences with books and interaction about books with classmates and others are motivating influences toward good reading habits (Palmer, Codling, & Gambrell, 1994).	Students share their independent reading books with one another, picking up new book ideas and reading habits.
Books read aloud to children by teachers and others, easy access to a wide variety of books, and time to read those books in school all help create enthusiastic readers (Fielding, Wilson, & Anderson, 1986; Palmer et al., 1994).	Students are encouraged to share excerpts from their books with one another, giving their group members access to different books.
Good readers choose books recommended by others, read for pleasure, and talk about books with others (Conniff, 1993). Adolescents tend to reject "school literacy" as irrelevant to their lives. (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Hinchman et al., 2004; Smith & Wilhelm, 2004).	The Book Bistro encourages students to enjoy reading.

classroom. At the same time, Kim implemented and studied Book Bistro in her seventh-grade classroom. We will summarize each inquiry.

Lori's action research

Ms. Ricciardi is a ninth-grade language arts teacher in a suburban school in northeastern Ohio in the United States. She already employs good independent reading practices in her classroom through reading and writing workshops (Atwell, 1987). When I approached Ms. Ricciardi about trying out the Book Bistro, she jumped at the chance. Although she was pleased with the

reading workshop, she believed that her students were isolated from one another in their independent reading.

The 62 students who participated in the action research study were in four different English classes. All students in the study were Caucasian except for one Asian American. The homogeneous ethnicity of the students reflects the school where the research took place.

We worked together to make the Book Bistro fit into her classroom for the first trial run. Ms. Ricciardi was concerned about a few of her students who struggled with reading. To accommodate

these students, we tailored solutions to individual needs. For example, one student worried about reading a book in which she was interested in the prescribed time. The librarian helped us find the book on tape so the student could follow along and finish with the rest of the students. Another student expressed concern to the teacher that there were inadequate choices of books at his reading level. Having appropriate resources is an essential component of successful independent reading (Allington, 2002). Again, the librarian helped us out by finding high-interest, low-readability books to accommodate him and other students.

Data for the study were collected in several different ways. A survey of 24 practicing teachers was taken to discover current independent reading programs and practices in their schools. Interviews were conducted with Ms. Ricciardi three times in order to explore her thoughts on the Book Bistro process. These interviews took place before the strategy was implemented, immediately after the first Book Bistro event, and one week after the first Book Bistro event. Two other surveys were administered to the students in Ms. Ricciardi's classes: one prior to the Book Bistro to inquire into their school-related independent reading habits, and one after the Book Bistro to serve as an evaluation of the process. Finally, class focus-group interviews (four) took place after each Book Bistro to discover students' thoughts and reactions to the strategy, which were videotaped. Table 2 presents sample questions used in the surveys of students and teachers.

The results of this action research study were encouraging at all levels. Ms. Ricciardi expressed her enjoyment of the activity as follows:

I loved watching the students who were so intent in their conversations about their books. Some of these kids have probably never had a real conversation with someone their age about something they read, and there they were, deep in discussion. I think students really put a lot of effort into preparing for this day, which is why they were able to have such good conversations. Their evaluations of each other seemed very thoughtful and complete.

Students expressed positive views of the Book Bistro in both the written evaluations and the whole-group interviews. Their comments varied. Some expressed interest in books they had just heard about, saying, "I think I found two books I want to read next!" Others compared the Book Bistro to conventional methods of assessing independent reading. One student declared, "Who wouldn't rather eat good food and talk about good books than write a boring report that no one really cares about?"

The student pre- and post-Book Bistro surveys are shown in Table 3. It is interesting to note that students were overwhelmingly negative about independent reading before participating in the Book Bistro. However, the surveys of practicing teachers showed that these teachers believed their students enjoyed independent reading in the classroom. Teachers did not know their students' feelings about independent reading as they believed they did.

To me, the best evidence that Book Bistro is a worthwhile activity came through the teacher's end-of-the-year evaluations. She reported that 95% of her students had commented on how much they liked the Book Bistro. Ms. Ricciardi is continuing to use the strategy in her classroom and reports the same positive results with her new group of students.

Kim's field test

Kim's class was a block of honors reading and language arts in grade 7. There were 22 students in the class, which met for 80 minutes each day. Kim helped students prepare over a 3-day period.

Implementation. On the first day, students were asked to bring in the book that they had finished reading for the Book Bistro. An index card was completed by each student giving the book title, author, genre, and a two-sentence plot summary. On the second day, the teacher organized the index cards based on genre or plot to place the students into their groups for the Book Bistro event. In some cases, male and female ratios were

Table 2
Sample questions and comments used in the preactivity survey administered to students and teachers

	Sample questions	Sample comments
Students	1. Do you like independent reading? Why or why not? 2. Many teachers grade independent reading using methods like book reports, quizzes, and so on. What do you think of these methods? 3. What ideas do you have that could make independent reading better?	It's boring; I never remember to read out of school. I don't like the pressure; they're too much for us and a little confusing; who enjoys quizzes or reports? Choose your own book; talk to other students about our reading.
Practicing teachers	1. Do you think students enjoy independent reading for a grade? Why or why not? 2. What improvements do you think could be made to conventional methods of assessing independent reading?	I think they enjoy it; they like it only when I give them options; I think they get really involved in their books, so yes. Discuss the books read with each other or me; group discussions; creative book reports; journaling; use different genres; retellings or drama.
Cooperating teacher	1. What method do you use now to assess independent reading? 2. What would like to change about your current method?	Right now, I use reader's workshops, where students join me in conferences about their reading. I wish I could bring students together to talk about their books.

considered in order to create a variety of students in each small group. To avoid duplicate books within a group, students who'd read the same selection were dispersed among groups.

For the Book Bistro event, students brought their books to class, along with a snack or drink. To begin, each student answered two questions from a menu of six open-ended questions about the book. These questions included the following:

1. What do your classmates need to know about your book that would interest them in reading it?
2. What touched you about this book?
3. Would you want to keep this book in your personal library? Why or why not?

4. Does this book remind you of anything you have learned or talked about in school?
5. Does this book lend itself to being made into a movie? Why or why not?
6. How does this book relate to your life?

After these questions were answered, students were divided into groups. The small groups gathered around the room in comfortable arrangements, and soft music was played on an audio cassette player by the teacher. When students began their book talks, they were comfortable with the strategy because the teacher and librarian had modeled it throughout the year. Each student knew not to give the ending away.

Table 3
Survey results—ninth grade (percentages)

Student results (<i>N</i> = 64)	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Attitudes toward independent reading before Book Bistro	3.2	–	96.8
Attitudes toward independent reading after Book Bistro	96.8	–	3.2
Teacher results (<i>N</i> = 25)			
Perceptions of student attitudes toward independent reading	98	–	2

Two peer evaluations were given to each student, which he or she filled out for the students on the left and the right. They began with a three-minute limit per person, but students expressed a need for more time, so we stretched it to five minutes per person.

Kim made written observations during the Book Bistro to study its effectiveness. She found that students were on task and focused for the hour. Students were smiling and laughing during their discussions—a welcome change from the tears and frustration she had seen and heard relating to the computerized system. Students voiced many positive comments about Book Bistro after the event. They enjoyed its casual atmosphere, the books they got to hear about that they otherwise would not have known, and the enjoyable nature of the activity. For the next time, students suggested mixing up genres in the groups so they could hear about other kinds of books and have more time for discussions. After the Book Bistro event, Kim found the peer evaluations were complete and constructive for her grading purposes.

Evaluation. Kim is required by her school to have a numerical grade for independent reading. She found she could assign points to the index cards students had prepared, to the peer evaluation forms, and to the overall individual participation. Using these components for several points each,

Kim computed an evaluation for each student. Overall, student evaluations were strong because students were motivated to participate. Teachers can construct a rubric to evaluate the process in a number of ways, depending on instructional goals.

Promising feedback

Since we initiated Book Bistro in grades 7 and 9, we have had teacher friends who implemented Book Bistro in grades 2, 4, and 11. These teachers reported the same success and student enthusiasm found in Lori's and Kim's studies.

While elementary students may need somewhat more preparation to be ready for Book Bistro—at least the first time—we predict this strategy can work well at all levels of K–12 education. Our younger primary students, for example, may be able to share in a Bistro format about books read to them. And a grouping of younger classes with somewhat older (cross-age) ones could, potentially, be very motivating and beneficial for both parties.

Positive attitudes build lifelong readers

So far, these ventures with Book Bistro have been met with strong, positive student response. We

know that the components of Book Bistro closely align with research about encouraging independent reading. We believe these strong, enthusiastic responses are likely to result in students' enjoying their independent reading and finding things they genuinely want to read.

Long-term research will be required to see if regularly held Book Bistros will affect more than just attitudes. However, because we know that positive attitudes are a requisite foundation for lifelong reading, we are committed to continuing this inquiry. We believe this simple strategy can easily become a regular part of many classrooms and schools and enhance the vitally important independent reading portion of the literacy curriculum.

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