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ABSTRACT

In Reading Recovery, training participants sit in a circle to discuss lessons that have been communally observed. The rationale for sitting in a circle without a table for discussion can be better understood by considering these two ideas: (1) the role of language in learning; and (2) the way conversation is affected by the physical positioning of the participants. This article discusses in detail these two ideas. The article notes that the emphasis on language as a tool for learning in Reading Recovery is supported by the theoretical works of Vygotsky (1978) and Luria (1979, 1982). (NKA)

Collaborative Inquiry in Reading Recovery, or "Why Sit In a Circle?"

by Emily Rodgers

Collaborative inquiry in Reading Recovery, or "Why sit in a circle?"

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One unique feature of Reading Recovery training and subsequent professional development is that participants sit in a circle to discuss lessons that have been communally observed. No tables are used; everyone simply pulls up a chair in a circle to have a discussion. Usually a small table is in the center of the circle upon which materials from the lessons are placed for quick and easy reference during the discussion.

This physical arrangement often seems unusual to people who are unfamiliar with Reading Recovery training and even to those who have been trained. They ask, "Why sit in a circle?" or, "Can't we sit at a round table?" The rationale for sitting in a circle without a table for discussion can be better understood by considering these two ideas: (1) the role of language in learning, and (2) the way conversation is affected by the physical positioning of the participants.

The role of language in learning, or "Can't I just sit and listen?"

An African proverb, "Ma mona mbwa mafila kumbundu," translates this way: "What the dog sees, dies in his heart." By contrast, what humans see lives forever. Why? Because of the power of language. Animals can learn from one another without the benefit of language, but each new generation is essentially bound to start over, to re-discover the same things that their ancestors already learned (notwithstanding the slow changes brought about by evolution). Birds don't leave behind manuals that describe how to build nests, for example. Instead, their basic plan for nest building has gone unchanged over many, many years. Humans, meanwhile, have made progress in leaps and bounds due in large part to our ability to use language, to share and build on the ideas of others. As Halliday observes (Wells, 2000), *"Language is the essential condition of knowing, the process by which experience becomes knowledge"* (p. 73, italics in original).

In Reading Recovery, we recognize the power of language to scaffold or *lift* learning, making it possible for us to learn more with assistance than we would be capable of by acting alone (see Vygotsky (1978) for a full description of the zone of proximal development). We pay special attention to our language when tutoring children, knowing that our language becomes a tool for the child to monitor and evaluate his reading attempts until he develops flexible plans of action. For example, I've heard a child say, "That didn't make sense," when she realized she had made an error while reading. It's no accident that this is just what I had been saying to her when she had neglected meaning previously. She had come to use my language as a tool to check on herself. Very soon, this overt language disappeared as she developed her own inner language to check this source of information.

The same is true for adult learning: language is the key to the process. Reading Recovery training offers many opportunities to use language to take us beyond our individual understandings about teaching—whether it's during a lesson being taught "behind the glass," a discussion afterwards, a school visit, or a colleague visit. In these settings, particularly when viewing lessons being taught behind the glass, we are encouraged to "say what you are thinking," to "share a thought with the whole group," or to "say more about that," as opposed to sitting quietly and thoughtfully. This is because through our use of language, we can not only extend and refine our own thinking, but we can also create "chains of reasoning" as Lyons has put it. In this way, the contributions of several participants build on one another, lifting the *whole group* to a new level of understanding (Lyons, 1994).

The discussion in the circle after the lessons also provides a powerful opportunity for language to become a tool for learning. In fact, this "conversation" is very similar to what Lindfors calls "collaborative inquiry." She defines inquiry as *"a language act in which one attempts to elicit another's help in going beyond his or her present understanding"* (Lindfors, 1999, p. ix, italics in original).

I cannot think of a better way to describe what we do in circle discussions. We are engaging in collaborative inquiry in order to scaffold one another beyond our present understandings. Using Lindfors' perspective, we can see that the questions we ask are invitations to others to help us understand more, and we respond to the invitations of others for the same reason. Each person has a responsibility to articulate ideas, to actively try to understand each other, to follow a line of inquiry started by someone else and to stay with it. *Exploring* is key, not necessarily *answering* (Lindfors, 1999). Collaborative inquiry cannot occur if each participant pursues her own ideas, ignoring the questions and comments of others. Nor does it work if some participants do not take part at all.

Language is critical to the process of learning across all dimensions of Reading Recovery, but as we all know, it may not happen easily. In fact, it can be greatly affected by something as seemingly benign as the way we position ourselves when we talk. For this reason, how we sit for discussions after the lessons taught behind the one-way mirror is important to consider.

The effects of the physical positioning of participants on conversation, or "Why sit in a circle?"

We are all aware that the way we converse with friends is likely to be different from the way we talk with our supervisors. For example, when talking to someone in a position of authority, we probably listen more carefully for our turn to speak so as not to talk at the same time as that person does. Yet we usually

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would not mind interrupting a friend, parent, or sibling to have our say. In addition, the words we choose to express ourselves to our bosses are different from those we use to converse with our friends. These features of talk are supported by research. What else can we learn from research about conversation?

One critical feature of conversation has to do with the physical positioning of the participants. McHoul examined the organization of turn-taking in classroom talk and noted that the *configuration* between participants is very important. He states,

> Intuitively we regard formal situations as those in which the persons taking part have allocated positions: the chairperson sits at the head of the members of the board who sit at either side of the table; the speech-maker stands elevated above his audience who are ranged in front of him in rows or at random; debaters sit facing one another . . . (1978, p. 183).

There is no "head of a table" in a circle (unless the formation is really an oval!) and therefore, no one holds more right to talk than any one else. Any other formation, including a circle with a table, automatically sets someone apart as the *leader* of the discussion. In circle discussions little need exists to acknowledge a single person as having the most capability of extending the learning of others. The nature of collaborative inquiry implies that, ". . . participants with relatively little expertise can learn with and from each other as well as from those with greater expertise" (Wells, 2000, p. 56).

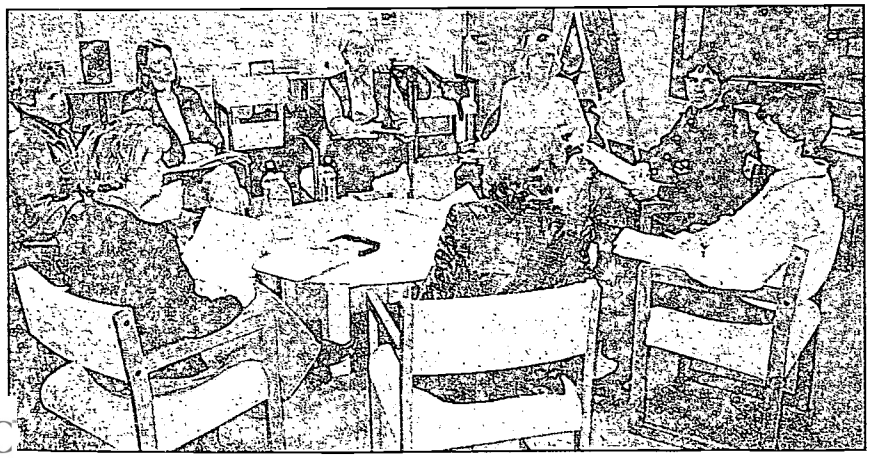
McHoul goes on to say that research supports the "common sense" notion that the way participants in conversation face each other will have a bearing on the way they interact. Kendon (in McHoul, 1978) asserts,

> Configurations in which the participants arrange themselves in a circle are probably those in which the participation rights of all the members are defined as equal. In configurations where one or several members are spatially differentiated from the others so that the pattern approaches a triangular, semi-circular or parallelogrammatic form, participation rights are no longer equal (1978, p. 184).

So, a circle may be the best design for discussion because it facilitates the participation of all members of the conversation: everyone has an equal right to talk. Any other arrangement, such as a rectangle or a triangle, compromises that right and has the potential to limit discussion.

Sometimes we think that a new group of people in training might be resistant to sitting in a circle and that it will be a difficult shift for them to make because it is so unusual. However, many teachers welcome the opportunity to sit this way; they get the message that they have a right and a responsibility to take part in discussions. This became obvious to me one day recently as I listened to a Reading Recovery teacher leader beginning to explain to a training class of teachers why they were sitting in a circle. She had just started a very good explanation when one of the teachers spoke up and simply said, "We're equals."

The emphasis on language as a tool for learning in Reading Recovery is supported by the theoretical works of Vygotsky (1978) and Luria (1979; 1982). In fact, as Wells (2000) has noted, one feature of the zone of proximal development that has complete scholarly agreement is the central role of language in learning. With all of our investment in opportunities for teachers to talk and support each other's learning, it makes sense that we would also take steps to ensure that their physical arrangement during discussions is one that encourages the lively, collaborative talk in which everyone has an equal opportunity to participate.



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