

## BOOK REVIEW



*Reviewed by*

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### **Reading Circles, Novels and Adult Reading Development**

**By Dr. Sam Duncan**

New York and London: Continuum. 2012

Hardback book. 220 pages. Chapters: 11. Price: \$120

*“...for at least the past two hundred years, adults have formed themselves into reading circles to read and discuss novels.”*

Sam Duncan's *Reading Circles, Novels and Adult Reading Development* (2012), examines the use of literary reading circles as an innovative approach to adult literacy and English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction. She accomplishes her task through two objectives. Her first objective is to introduce readers to a history of literacy, reading, and reading circles, through a detailed bibliography. In the bibliographical chapters (1-5), an important point that Duncan stresses is that in ancient times, reading was mainly public, while in contemporary society it is primarily a private and silent activity. Reading circles represent a combination of both public and silent reading. Her research shows that public reading and sharing is psychologically beneficial to learners.

Duncan also discusses the various contexts and spaces where people have historically learned reading through the reading circle approach. She explains that reading circles have existed from antiquity to the present day among all classes and genders. Reading circles have been conducted by religious groups, among family members, by trade groups, workers, Victorian women, secretly by slaves, and by mutual improvement societies where groups of people meet for reading discussion and self-education. Reading circles have been conducted in a variety of settings including libraries, cigar shops, and coffee houses.

Duncan's second objective is to describe her ethnographic study on reading circles, and the pedagogical implications of the study, which she does in chapters 6-11. Her research participants consisted of a group of 10 students enrolled in adult basic education classes. Three had grown up speaking English and seven were ESL learners. The goal of the group was to read a novel and discuss it in a reading circle. The allotted time was 40 minutes a week out of a class consisting of 3 weekly hours. Her methodology is described in detail, affording readers the opportunity to understand the steps involved in conducting ethnographic work.

One of the most important pedagogical implications of reading circles is that learners are constantly engaging their peers in the process of improving academic skills. For example, in Duncan's reading circles, learners were constantly discussing vocabulary, making sense of the text, and following ideas and characters in the novel. Duncan argues that engaging peers in discussion allows participants to practice their ability to teach, crystalize and clarify thoughts. Also, it encourages practice and development of skills useful outside of the reading circle. For example, in Duncan's reading circles, students negotiated content, schedule, what to cover for each class, and expected outcomes. They negotiated their roles in the social space and their relationships to each other. They also negotiated ethical issues about characters. Learners discussed whether they agreed, disagreed, and/or empathized, with the characters, and whether they felt the characters behaved ethically. The act of negotiating roles, engaging others in discussions, agreeing and disagreeing, and questioning ethics are indispensable to daily adult life. A final salient element of the collective engagement was the enjoyment of the participants.

In her conclusion, Duncan makes several remarks. I find the most important to be about the false dichotomy between the call for functional literacy and the presumed non-functional character of literary engagement. Duncan argues that the social interaction, pleasure, philosophy, ethics, emotions, culture, and metaphysical aspects of literary engagement found in reading circles are important aspects of functional citizenship and social participation.

Given the detail and depth of the text, the target audience of this book is college students, particularly upper level and graduate students, faculty, and researchers. The first five chapters of the book will also appeal to anyone interested in the history of reading and literacy.

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Duncan's book accomplishes its objectives well. Her bibliographic section is very detailed. Her research is thorough, referencing the most significant authors in the field. She is also careful in using existing literature to offer support for all her themes, arguments and assertions. Duncan thoroughly describes her ethnographic approach, results and conclusions, allowing readers to gain insight in this research method. Finally, Duncan discusses pedagogical implication of her findings, which she further substantiates with her bibliography.

As an adult educator for over 25 years, using "non-traditional", student centered instructional approaches; I have found Duncan's book to be consistent with my experiences. I strongly believe that, given the right support, students can engage literature collectively and collaborate in the process of learning. In fact, as Duncan argues, I have found that when students collaborate with each other in didactic enterprises, they learn more effectively and acquire a number of metacognitive strategies that are not always developed in more structured learning environments.

To conclude, reading circles have been used for several hundred years as a tool for literacy acquisition and development. Unfortunately, this pedagogical approach has been largely ignored by the predominant Adult Basic Education literature, which has been plagued with the more prescriptive functional literacy offerings that became popular in the early 80s, and have been further supported after the passage of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998. As such, Duncan's text represents a good resource for anyone exploring alternative and sound pedagogical approaches.

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