

Building Excitement for Reading and Building New Friendships:
Using Book Bistro with Pre-Service Teachers and Middle School Students

Students are quick to assume that there are no books that are relatable to them or that those books simply don't exist. If there's one thing that I learned from this experience, it's that it is our responsibility to provide students with the opportunity to discover books that they relate to, to excite them about reading. I heard many students say things like "That's just like me because..." and "I want to read that because..." which means that we've ultimately done our job.

~Pre-service teacher

This event was very fun. We got to see all these different books - I would love to read them all! ~ 7th grade student

On a dreary Friday in January, one middle school language arts classroom is buzzing with chatter. Inside are six tables, covered with checked cloths, glowing LED candles, and menus. Soft music is playing, and two teachers (dressed as chefs) are circulating through the room, distributing snacks. At each table are two pre-service teachers and a group of 7th grade students. One group is passing around *The Crossover* (Alexander, K.) and discussing its cover art. Another group is reading aloud passages from *Projekt 1065* (Gratz, A.). At a far table, a pre-service teacher is showing students book trailers on her laptop. A large placard on the classroom's door says, "Welcome to Book Bistro." This is our story.

Last year as I was planning my adolescent literature course for pre-service teachers, I had a "light bulb" moment. Sitting in a presentation at the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Annual Convention, I listened to middle school teachers talk about the computerized reading system they were mandated to use and how their students had lost interest in reading. Immediately, I thought of my friend Kim, a dynamic 7th and 8th grade language arts teacher, who also is a model mentor to my pre-service teachers. She and I have had similar discussions over the past two years - ever since her school adopted a computerized literacy program. This program was implemented across three content areas, and students have spent two class periods every week reading and responding to informational articles in order to meet the district's goal for students to read 80 articles per year. As this program focuses on individualized, online instruction, it does not allow students opportunities to engage in book talks or peer discussions. Kim noticed that many of her students seemed bored or frustrated, and often they did not try to finish their articles. Additionally, her students were no longer interested in independent reading.

Kim wanted her students to return to school in January with a fresh outlook toward reading. For this to happen, we knew her students needed to have choices

and be able to talk and share their thoughts out loud with peers. Immediately, I thought about Book Bistro (Hamilton, 2012; Kasten & Wilfong, 2005; Wilfong & Oberhauser, 2012). 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 cafe atmosphere” (Kasten & Wilfong, 2005, p.657). Teachers can use this strategy to introduce students to want-to-read texts and to provide them a place to collaboratively discuss texts they have already read.

In designing our Book Bistro, I wanted to include the pre-service teachers in my upcoming adolescent literature class. As a teacher educator, I know that my pre-service teachers best learn new pedagogical strategies when they see them enacted in real classroom settings rather than when they simply read about them in a textbook. Like other literacy educators, I know my pre-service teachers not only need to possess knowledge of a wide range of texts; they also need to be able to book-match, assist students in self-selection, and create a “community of readers” within their future classrooms (Shaffer, Cruser, Lowery, & Shults; 2019). Participating in Book Bistro is one way for them to learn these valuable teaching practices.

This article describes a collaborative Book Bistro between my pre-service teachers and Kim’s middle school students. First, we will describe how this strategy aligns with scholarship supporting adolescent readers and pre-service teachers. We will then share the logistics and results of our event as well as suggestions for others interested in using this strategy.

Background

Building Independent Readers

Teachers face several challenges in regards to reading instruction. One challenge is when adolescent learners view reading as a chore rather than an opportunity to authentically connect with characters, concepts, and themes. One way of fostering students’ interest is through independent reading. By allocating time to read, providing books relevant to their readers, and allowing students to select their own texts, teachers can “build habitual readers with conscious reading identities” (Shaffer, et al., 2019). This notion of a “reading identity” is essential. When adolescent learners assume this identity, they view themselves as competent readers (Kasten & Wilfong, 2005) and develop individual reading interests, such as discovering favorite topics, genres, or authors (Springer, Harris, & Dole, 2017). Possessing this identity is important in order for students’ reading lives to extend outside of the classroom. Being a reader should not be limited to teacher-selected texts and teacher-led tasks. Instead, independent readers are those who choose their own books, make time to read, and engage in ongoing learning. Teachers can offer

support by determining their students' interests and connecting them to texts that represent the varied cultures, languages, genders, races, histories, etc. within their school and the wider community (Gere, Martinez, Homan, Lillge, Neiderhiser, Parsons, Spooner, Swafford, & Uzogara, 2012; International Literacy Association [ILA], 2019; ILA, 2018; Shaffer et al., 2019; Springer, et al., 2017; Wilfong, 2007).

Independent reading not only allows students to find their identity; it can lead to increased volume of reading (Allington, 2014; Schaffer et al., 2019). That is, the more students read, the more they are exposed to new words and concepts. The more they read, the more experiences they have making meaning and self-correcting errors, thus increasing their reading fluency (Allington, 2014). Not all students may have an inherent desire to read independently, whether this act takes place inside or outside the classroom. Teachers may have to build students' interest. One recommendation is the use of situational interest, which "...occurs when teachers create a classroom climate and instructional activities in which everyone is excited to participate" (Springer, et al., 2017, p. 45). Such activities might include partner conversations, performative readings (i.e., role-playing), and viewing/creating book trailers (Adomat, 2010; Gere et al., 2012; Springer et al., 2017). Book Bistro embodies these key activities.

Various educators have had success with Book Bistro. Kasten and Wilfong (2005) conducted a study exploring the effects of this strategy on middle and high school students. The scholars partnered with two ELA teachers (7th grade and 9th grade) from different schools, each of whom hosted a one-day Book Bistro. Both teachers structured the event as follows: students brought to class the texts they had finished reading independently, and they presented brief "book talks" to peers in small groups. Based on data collected (students' survey responses and teacher interviews), Book Bistro positively impacted students' attitudes toward reading and increased their classroom engagement. Kasten and Wilfong assert, "...this simple strategy can easily become a regular part of many classrooms...and enhance the vitally important independent reading portion of the literacy curriculum" (2005, p.663).

In another setting, (Hamilton, 2012), a high school librarian teamed up with a 10th grade ELA teacher to create a Book Bistro. Rather than holding the event in the classroom, the pair hosted the event in the school's library. Students took time "tasting" books pre-selected and completed a list of favorite texts. From there, the librarian and ELA teacher placed students in inquiry circles to participate in collaborative reading, circle discussions, and individual responses. This Bistro, then, served as a springboard for students to discover a topic to research and develop into a long-term inquiry project. Both of these classroom examples demonstrate how this strategy can be adapted to fit various contexts and purposes.

Supporting Pre-Service Literacy Teachers

Book Bistro can also support pre-service teachers' professional development. Wilfong & Oberhauser (2012) explored using Book Bistro among middle school students and pre-service teachers. In this case, pre-service teachers enrolled in a literacy course were paired with urban middle school students as reading pen pals. Throughout the semester, each pair read a book (at a distance) and engaged in "conversations" by exchanging reading notebooks. At the end of the semester, the pre-service teachers traveled to the school for a one-day Book Bistro. At this event, the pen pals met and gave book talks to their peers. Based on participants' responses, students reported having positive attitudes toward reading after being a part of this event; further, the pre-service teachers commented that this experience helped them better understand middle school students in general and urban students in particular (Wilfong & Oberhauser, 2012).

In addition to the relational aspect of Book Bistro, this experience enables pre-service teachers to practice discussion-based pedagogy. According to scholars (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003; Gere et al., 2012), discussion-based approaches are highly effective for teaching reading comprehension to both low- and high-achieving adolescent learners. Rather than teaching reading via lecture or worksheets, teachers are encouraged to model how to make meaning with complex texts, help students make text-to-text connections, and facilitate meaningful conversations (Applebee et al., 2003; Gere, et al., 2012). In order for pre-service teachers to become proficient with these approaches, they must receive professional learning and have opportunities to test them out in actual classrooms. Professional organizations, such as NCTE and ILA, concur that "...prospective teachers increase their competence by applying content and pedagogical knowledge within authentic teaching contexts...including opportunities for one-to-one instruction (tutorial settings); and engagement with culturally and linguistically diverse students and families" (2017, p. 5). Embedding a field-based Book Bistro experience within a methods course provides pre-service teachers the opportunity to interact with individual students and practice discussion-based pedagogy in a comfortable, inviting setting.

Our Collaborative Book Bistro

Knowing that Book Bistro had the potential to pique the interest of Kim's students and provide professional learning to my pre-service teachers, we decided to hold a collaborative Bistro all day in her classroom in early January. Our purpose was twofold: 1) To introduce Kim's students to books they may want to choose for independent reading; and 2) To allow the pre-service teachers opportunities to practice discussion-based pedagogy.

Participants

Kim teaches at an urban middle school in Georgia with approximately 490 students. Over half of the school's population is economically disadvantaged, with all students receiving free lunch. Her class sizes range from 18-30 students, with five 55-minute class periods consisting of two advanced 8th grade classes and three traditional 7th grade classes. Kim's students were the "guests" at the Bistro.

The 12 pre-service teachers enrolled in my YA literature course hosted the event. All pre-service teachers were undergraduate students majoring in middle grades or secondary English education at a regional public university. Their YA literature course was offered as part of a 3-week (abbreviated) January-term, and the Bistro served as their capstone experience. Prior to Book Bistro, they read multiple texts and each chose two YA novels to share with the middle school students. As part of our course activities, pre-service teachers practiced various discussion-based strategies they would use during the event, such as making predictions about a text from its cover art, selecting high-interest passages to read aloud, giving engaging book-talks, and using other tools (e.g., book trailers, reviews, and authors' bios) to entice readers.

The Event

To set the mood, we decorated Kim's room to resemble a quaint cafe. (See Figure 1). During the event, two pre-service teachers were seated at each Bistro table, along with copies of their novels. In small groups, Kim's students rotated from table to table as the pre-service teachers facilitated the book tastings. As the pre-service teachers and students discussed the novels, Kim and I served our guests snacks (See Figure 2). Students were also provided with menus, on which they noted each novel's title, author, and genre as well as their impressions. (See Figure 3). We repeated this same structure for each of Kim's classes throughout the day.

Reactions and Responses

In order to gauge the Bistro's impact, we collected exit slip responses from the students and reflection essays from the pre-service teachers. The students were asked to write about their "biggest take-away" from the experience. The pre-service teachers were asked to describe what they learned about using this strategy and how they might use it (or adjust it) in their future classrooms. Both groups reacted positively and offered the following insights.

New Books, Renewed Reading Interest

The majority of students and pre-service teachers agreed that this strategy is an effective way to introduce new books. Several students made comments such as, "It was interesting talking about a lot of new books all at once," "I got to see books

I've never even heard of," "I liked having so many book options to choose from," and "...All the different books - It was fun hearing that people have different opinions about what to read." The students' enthusiastic responses seemed to surprise the pre-service teachers. One reflected,

I got a group of students, who all stated that they disliked reading. I was kind of nervous that they wouldn't like my book, however I pitched it to them in the most interesting way possible...After all that, I wearily asked, "Do you guys think you might want to read this novel?" To my pleasant surprise, all of the students said they would.

I was elated!

Each of the pre-service teachers, in fact, expressed concern that their students would be disinterested in their book talks or complain about how much they hated reading. Instead, they described instances in which students were engaged and excited. As one explained,

I did not expect the students to react as positively as they did...

Although many of them were extremely hesitant to speak, you could see that they were engaged based solely on their eye contact. This made me even more enthusiastic about participating because many of the students told us that they didn't like reading at all, but they would read our books.

Another pre-service teacher noted, "We got to see students that are not normally big on reading become excited and questioning why they do not read more." Based on the pre-service teachers' reflections, exposing the students to new books through lively conversations appeared to have renewed their interest in reading.

The middle school students affirmed the pre-service teachers' observations. On their exit slips, many wrote, "I should read more," "I want to read more often because there are a lot of great books," "I want to explore new books," and similar comments. In addition to expressing a desire to read, students described their enthusiasm for the event itself. One said, "Book Bistro is amazing! I want to read some of these books now." Some of her peers added, "I liked the activity," "we were hyped," and "it was fun, the books were lit." This experience also impacted the pre-service teacher's interest in reading. One admitted, "Even though I don't like reading much myself, this bistro made me want to start reading more." Similarly, her peer remarked, "I have been able to find the fun in reading again, and this makes me even more excited about helping my students to find books that excite them." A third said, "It's been so long since I read YA books. I forgot how great they are." Book Bistro, then, allowed participants the opportunity to learn about new texts and become interested in reading.

New Friends

In their exit slips and reflections, both the students and pre-service teachers also talked about how much they simply enjoyed engaging in conversations with each

other. For instance, one student commented, “It was nice to take a break and get together and talk about what we like and what we wanna be.” “The college students were super nice,” another wrote, “and they were fun to talk to because we had some [of the] same opinions about sports and stuff.” Several students mentioned conversations about topics not at all related to books or reading. Instead, they seemed content being able to meet the pre-service teachers and spend time chatting with them. One young man expressed, “I loved everything and especially the time talking! It brought us together like friends.”

Spending time conversing with the students impacted the pre-service teachers as well. One described a student who “opened up” to her and made her feel special. “This young man was so quiet; he would just whisper to me. He talked about his favorite movies and video games and said he doesn’t have many friends, but he felt comfortable with me...he melted my heart.” Later in her reflection she acknowledged that “...students are all different and unique and that is okay. My job is not to teach English, but to reach them.” Her peer also said that her favorite part of Book Bistro was simply talking with the students. “This was a rare experience for me,” she wrote, “because during my other field placements I didn’t get to interact with students on such an intimate level and for such a lengthy amount of time.” Thinking of her future classroom, she said, “I won’t always be able to be so intimate with my students due to time constraints, class sizes, etc. So, this being said, I learned that I liked teaching using class discussions. It’s an easy way to observe students’ prior knowledge, misconceptions, and growth without the quizzes or tests.” Overall, the pre-service teachers noted the importance of including small-group and one-on-one discussions in their classrooms as a means for determining students’ reading interests, informally assessing their comprehension, and making personal relationships with them.

Classroom Implications

The purpose of this collaborative Book Bistro was to introduce Kim’s students to new books and to allow my pre-service teachers the opportunity to engage in discussion-based pedagogy. This event stemmed from other studies confirming the strategy’s success in engaging student readers (Hamilton, 2012; Kasten & Wilfong, 2005). According to responses from the students, the majority claimed to have enjoyed learning about new books and spending time talking with the pre-service teachers; they were also excited about reading. In fact, Kim noticed that the next time she took her students to the library, books were “flying off the shelves.” They eagerly sought titles they had discussed at the Book Bistro.

Students’ reactions during and after the event indicated that they valued having choices as readers. The computerized literacy program Kim’s school adopted, however, does not allow students to self-select texts. This program

provides differentiated instruction and aims to increase student Lexile reading levels by placing an emphasis on close reading and embedded writing. First, students complete an initial assessment that determines their Lexile level, which represents a grade-level range. Students are then assigned texts to read within their appropriate range. These texts are informational articles in the subjects of science, history, technology, or sports. Since these articles are assigned based on students' reading levels rather than their interests, there is no guarantee that the content of these texts will be engaging or relevant.

Scholars concur that text selection is a key component to literacy learning (ILA, 2019). In addition to texts being at appropriate levels, they should also represent students' varied cultures, languages, and perspectives (Gere, et al., 2012; ILA, 2019; ILA, 2018; ILA, 2017; Shaffer et al., 2019; Wilfong, 2007). As the International Literacy Association (2017) explains, "Effective classrooms provide all students with a mirror in which they can see themselves. The books, topics, and issues they encounter foster insights into their own personal and cultural experiences" (p. 2). When teachers must adhere to a mandated curriculum, they may have difficulty providing varied reading options. Pairing required reading with independent reading is one way to offer students choices, which can positively impact their engagement and literacy development (Afflerbach & Harrison, 2017; Springer, et al., 2017). As confirmed by students' responses and other studies (Hamilton, 2012; Kasten & Wilfong, 2005), Book Bistro is one way teachers can assist students in self-selecting texts.

In addition to exposing Kim's students to new books, a second goal for this event was to allow my pre-service teachers the opportunity to engage in discussion-based strategies (Applebee et al., 2003; Gere et al., 2012). Book Bistro promotes peer conversations as groups discuss cover art, make predictions, closely read passages, and share their impressions. Although students viewed these interactions simply as fun activities, they were actually practicing skills related to the state-mandated standardized test they would take later in the semester. This test requires students to read multiple texts and demonstrate their understanding by answering multiple choice questions and writing constructed responses to specific prompts. The computerized literacy program that Kim's school adopted mirrors the reading and writing tasks students will perform on the test. That is, students practice summarizing, comparing and contrasting, and citing evidence. Since this program is online, students also practice keyboarding skills prior to taking the test, which is also online. Since this program is individualized; however, students are not able to collaborate with their peers and engage in discussions.

For teachers who are required to use similar programs, pairing individualized instruction with discussion-based strategies, such as Book Bistro, allows students to opportunities to respond to texts in multiple ways. For example, one of the pre-service teachers suggested, "I would use Book Bistro throughout the

year. I would place students in small groups, with each group reading a different book. Then, they could have group discussions and use Book Bistro to present their group's book to the rest of the class." Another envisioned using this strategy to select texts that the class would read together. "I'd give the students a list of possible books or stories," she explained, "and students would have to do research to see which ones they thought were the most interesting. We'd then incorporate Book Bistro so students could share what they learned." Another proposed using Book Bistro as an assessment. Rather than requiring students to take a test or write an essay, "...students could give presentations to show that they understood the book." These responses demonstrate that the pre-service teachers gained a "taste" for using discussion-based strategies and developed ideas for their future classrooms, thus confirming others' findings that Book Bistro is a flexible and practical tool (Hamilton, 2012; Kasten & Wilfong, 2005).

In the future, Book Bistro could be used to provide a meaningful long-term, field-based experience for our pre-service teachers. Due to the time constraints of my abbreviated course, we were only able to spend one day with the middle school students. Based on the pre-service teachers' reflections, this day was impactful as they were able to work intimately with the small groups, and - through conversations - make personal connections with students. Pre-service teachers recommended offering this course as part of the traditional, 15-week semester. By doing so, we could pair them with small groups of students to form reading clubs. Book Bistro could be used as a "kick off" event for groups to choose their texts and a "finale" event for groups to share their reading experiences with peers. Participating in an ongoing reading group would allow the pre-service teachers opportunities to form relationships with students and practice pedagogical strategies in a more intimate setting than whole-class instruction, a model recommended by professional organizations such as NCTE and ILA (2017, p. 5). Though our one-day Book Bistro proved to be a success, it is clear that this strategy has the potential of being utilized in many more ways to support independent reading, discussion-based reading instruction, and teacher professional development.

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Appendix A



Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.