A Qualitative Study on Book Clubs and Dialogic Literary Gatherings in Spain and Brazil

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ABSTRACT

Some organizations in Spain that seek to foster innovation in reading are keen to establish book clubs or dialogical literary gatherings. However, there are notable differences between these two practices that are not always clear. This paper presents the results of an observational study based on participant observation and interviews with key informants that tackle their similarities and differences in school and social settings. The results show that their differences lie in origin, purpose, methodology, and coordination, among others. The conclusions show different paradigms behind these practices, and organizations should opt for one or the other.

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Introduction

Innovation is understood as a process of planned change that occurs within an institution to pursue improvement, regardless of the novelty of the proposal or the creativity involved. From this perspective, innovating in terms of encouraging reading in both childhood and in adulthood implies that institutions implement processes of planned change to face a threefold challenge: fostering reading comprehension, promoting a taste for reading, and developing the habit of reading (Avci and Yuksel 2011; Gritter 2011; Reed and Vaughn 2012). This threefold challenge is not an easy one to achieve, but some reading strategies have been proven to be effective in those social organizations with a greater predisposition to innovate (Aranda and Galindo 2009; Beach & Yussen, 2011; Duncan 2012; Lyons and Ray 2014; Valls, Soler, and Flecha 2008). This paper will focus on two of them: book clubs and dialogical literary gatherings, which have seen an extraordinary growth (Aranda and Galindo 2009; Valls, Soler, and Flecha 2008). Although these practices are used in some organizations, there are still many more that could further innovation in reading and benefit from its advantages (Lyons and Ray 2014), which should be promoted and expanded in the future.

As will be seen both practices yield remarkable results in the cultivation of reading. The object of this study is to identify the similarities and differences
between the two, from a theoretical (next section) and a practical point of view (results section, see Table 2). This will help clarify scientifically the opportunities that each of them provide to the institutions that plan to use them to innovate their approaches to reading.

**Theoretical framework**

These two strategies have been extensively researched internationally, as has a third strategy that is very similar but has not yet been used in Spain and Brazil, namely study circles (Certo et al. 2010; Duncan 2012). 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 promoted (Aranda and Galindo 2009; Domingo and Sola 2005; Álvarez, 2015).

In contrast, some studies have been published in Spain and Brazil on dialogic literary gatherings (Pulido and Zepa 2010; Serrano, Mirceva, and Larena 2010; Valls, Soler, and Flecha 2008). 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 success (Aranda and Galindo 2009; Duncan 2012; Lyons and Ray 2014; Reed and Vaughn 2012; Valls, Soler, and Flecha 2008):

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, or academic background.
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 centers: cultural associations, libraries, schools, prisons, nursing homes, community centers, 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 centers 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 reading (Álvarez and Pascual, 2014). They have now become diversified, and in some cases book clubs are organized by specific literary genres (comics, black novels, poetry), or to work on specific themes, both in face-to-face and virtual formats (Domingo and Sola 2005).

This practice has seen an extraordinary development in the United States, the United Kingdom, Latin America and Spain, especially in public libraries and bookshops (Aranda and Galindo 2009). They have promoted the taste for reading among people who have taken different paths to reading, ranging from non-readers to those who were regular readers who sought to improve their literary and linguistic skills (Hall 2009); helped to increase participants’ enjoyment of literature in their leisure time and deepen their understanding (Gritter 2011; Reed and Vaughn 2012); while also stimulating learning and critical reading skills and contributing to develop their taste of reading and book discussion (Author & Colleague, 2014). In the educational setting, it has been proven that a book club can be a very effective strategy to boost innovation and improvement in reading. On the one hand, it can enhance the professional development of teaching practitioners at all levels, both at university and in schools, by promoting a more democratic and deliberative teaching. On the other hand, it also fosters greater engagement by students and generates better reading comprehension skills, focusing as it does on in-depth value-laden reading (Gardiner, Cumming-Potvin, and Hesterman 2013; Polleck 2010).

Dialogic literary gatherings began in the early 1980s in Spain at an adult education center, as part of a process of egalitarian and democratic change. It stemmed from the efforts of community organizations, 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 based on Freire’s concept of dialogicity and have given rise to another concept, that of ‘dialogic reading’ (Serrano, Mirceva, and Larena 2010), 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 world (Valls, Soler, and Flecha 2008). Literary gathering members read classic works of universal literature, divided into chapters and hold a meeting aimed at their discussion.

This practice it is also expanding in Brazil, Chile, and Australia, where highly diverse groups of people are reading, sharing, and enjoying the reading of the universal classics. In this way, they appropriate works considered ‘difficult’, and improve their self-esteem and confidence (Serrano, Mirceva, and Larena 2010; Valls, Soler, and Flecha 2008). People gradually consolidate their reading level by acquiring a greater vocabulary and increasing their basic skills, as personal challenges can be overcome by through public speaking. As their participants are very often adults or children of low social status, they manage to improve their poverty status through the interaction of communicative dialogical acts. Through such interaction, it becomes clear that there is no single correct interpretation but many, surpassing typically authoritarian conceptions in academic environments where the expert’s interpretation is rewarded (Pulido and Zepa 2010). By participating in these activities, people transform their own vision of reality, broadening their points of view through contributions that they themselves formulate and hear from others, reflecting and developing a linguistic and critical reflexive ability that they can later transfer to other day-to-day situations that they face (Pulido and Zepa 2010; Serrano, Mirceva, and Larena 2010). In the educational setting, dialogic literary gatherings have also been found to improve and accelerate literacy learning for children and families who are also involved in this practice (Valls, Soler, and Flecha 2008).

Despite the fact that the two strategies described have led to important 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 organizations, where gaps exist in their differentiating features.

**Methodological framework**

This paper presents the results of an observational 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 organizations.

The aim of the study is to identify the similarities and differences between a book club and a dialogic literary gathering within an organization (school, community center, 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 obser-
vational perspective, to audio-record (if possible), and note the most
prominent discussions and the style of moderation carried out.
(2) To discover the opinion of opinion of key informants in book clubs
and dialogical literary gatherings and so investigate further their simi-
larities and differences.
(3) To develop a system to categorize the discrepancies between book
clubs and dialogical literary gatherings.

The research method employed was the case study (Stake 2005), with the use of
an observational model. 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
observational models, 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.

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 organizations, as well as interviews with key informants (coor-
dinators and participants), and the circumstances described below were
observed. Initially the study was only to be conducted in Spain, but on the
occasion of a research stay in Brazil, I took the opportunity to visit literary
gatherings with children and adults and I thought that this could be an enriching
contribution to my research and would be helpful with data triangulation.

A total of 82 meetings were attended (48 in book clubs and 34 in dialogic
literary gatherings) over three years. 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 30 interviews were conducted (with seven coordi-
nators of, book club and 12 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.

Once the information had been collected, the qualitative data were orga-
nized and analyzed following content analysis guidelines, given the need to
ascertain how these two innovative practices operated, and the participants’
points of view as key players in their development.
Results

The results show that book clubs and dialogic literary gatherings differ in eight aspects, in addition to their origin (described in the theoretical framework Table 1).

They have been grouped in pairs in order to better account for them. To help illustrate and understand the results, brief transcripts of interviews or interactions from the meetings have been incorporated into the text.

Participants and timelines

The participants in the literary gatherings had very different reading levels, who predominantly belonged 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 toward reading tended to join as can be seen in the next extract, where a girl surprisingly stated that she had joined the book club to learn to enjoy reading.

*Book club (extra-curricular activity) for year 5 and year 6 students of Primary Education. State school. Asturias, Spain.*

Coordinator. Last year a student came to the book club who did not like reading, and our jaw dropped. Why did you come to the book club if you do not like to read? And she said: ‘I have come precisely to learn to enjoy reading, to see if I can start to like reading.’ We were all amazed. And the best thing is that she succeeded.

These instances show how important these practices are for some participants. 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 centers. In both groups, heterogeneity among the participants was seen in a good light.

| Table 1. Differences between these two practices. |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Aspects         | Book clubs      | Dialogic literary gatherings |
| Participants    | High reading level | Very different reading levels |
| Timelines       | Usually monthly meetings | Usually weekly meetings |
| Purpose         | Critically analyze | Improve self-esteem |
| Variants        | Specific literary genres or particular authors, periods, or topics | Dialogical pedagogical gatherings, dialogical musical gatherings, dialogic curricular gatherings, and dialogical gatherings on the arts |
| Coordinator(s)  | Expert in literature | Rotate among participants |
| Moderation      | It depends on the style of the coordinator | Based on basic rules |
| Literary works  | All kind of books | Universal classics |
| Selection       | By the coordinator | By the participants |
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 decided by the group (one chapter, 20 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), as can be seen in the extract below, in which a group decided how much reading they would assign for the next meeting.

**Dialogic literary gathering. Year 6 Primary Education classroom. State School. Cantabria**

Coordinator: Well, how much shall we read for the next session, which is in a fortnight?
Male Student: One chapter.
Female Student: No, no, no, two. Let’s vote.
Coordinator: We don’t vote, but we choose based on arguments. Arguments for reading one?
Female Student: We remember more things.
Coordinator: Arguments for reading two chapters?
Male Student: In the past, we have hardly had anything to discuss when reading two.
Female Student: Because it takes less time to read the whole book.
Coordinator: So, we will read two chapters, shall we?

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.

**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 behavior of the protagonists, review the most important passages in the eyes of readers, analyze 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. As shown by a coordinator in the extract below, the purposes of reading clubs are very varied.

**Interview with a book club coordinator (municipal library). Cantabria, Spain**

Interviewer: What do book clubs do for adults?
Coordinator: I think they work as hobbies and provide entertainment. Also, they allow them to relate to other people with common interests and to learn, by sharing discussions in the meetings.

Interviewer: What is the most important aspect in the meetings?
Coordinator: Listening to the comments of the other participants. There is always someone who has identified an idea or nuance that you had missed. Also, the exchange of information on other books or other issues that come up is very important.

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 analyze the work from an expert point of view, thus generating unequal interventions (in relation to academic intelligence). On the contrary, 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 book club have emerged in book clubs in line to their different purposes, organized 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 dialogical gatherings by the use of video conferencing.

**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.

*Interview with the coordinator of a book club in a municipal library. Cantabria, Spain*

Coordinator: The coordinator is a key player in book clubs. This is a city with a demographic of an aging population, where many people have a university degree. This gives the debates perhaps a slightly higher intellectual tone than average in other book clubs, which means that people who do not have that kind of knowledge don’t join or leave. And instead it attracts other people. The level of the debates is set by the coordinator, and this may be off-putting for certain people and attractive for others.

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.
Interview with dialogic literary gathering coordinator in an Adult Education Centre. Catalonia, Spain.

Coordinator: Moderating is easy, there is no mystery to it. I usually do it, but someone else has done it in the past. That’s not important. What is really important is that people who never thought they could understand a classic, don’t just understand it, but enjoy it. You have already seen the comments they made about “100 Years of Solitude” today. They began to read the book a week ago, and the first contributions were to raise doubts about unknown words and small complaints because they got lost with the names of all the characters in the book. But then you can tell that they ended up tackling the most important passages of those pages with great honesty, understanding everything and relating it to their lives.

**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, as conveyed by the coordinator featured below.

**Book club (extracurricular activity) for year 5 and year 6 students of a state-funded private primary school. Cantabria, Spain**

Coordinator: In the book club, sometimes we read classics, but this year we had to do it without money, and the children have to buy their own copies. There are all kinds of families, so we opted for books which cost about seven euros so price does not prevent parents from taking the children to the club. Adapted classics range from 10–15 euros. Maybe we read a classic or two, but the truth is that the participants haven’t said anything about reading classics. They chose Matilda and James and the Giant.
Peach as well. We may also read Konrad, which is in the library and therefore it’s free. But basically you have to juggle a whole load of things to make the club work.

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 reach 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? 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, behaviors, attitudes, and ways of thinking and acting that occur in this type of books.

**Conclusions**

Depending on the profile of the social organization that seeks to promote innovation in reading, 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 reading (Avci and Yuksel 2011; Gritter 2011; Reed and Vaughn 2012).

**Table 2.** The process of improving reading skills by the use of a book club or a dialogic literary gathering.

| Step | Description |
|------|-------------|
| 1    | Starting point: The child or adult has a greater or lesser level of reading comprehension, taste for reading and habit of reading |
| 2    | Coming into contact with the chosen book |
| 3    | Development in reading comprehension, taste for reading and reading habit of the child or adult |
| 4    | Sharing their interpretations of the book |
| 5    | Reflecting and gaining a fuller understanding of the book by the child/adult |
| 6    | Increasing the taste for reading and the reading habits of the child or adult |
| 7    | Coming into contact with a new book |

Starting point again
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 by international research (Author & Colleague, 2014; Aranda and Galindo 2009; Beach and Steven 2011; Duncan 2012; Lyons and Ray 2014; Pulido and Zepa 2010; Serrano, Mirceva, and Larena 2010; Valls, Soler, and Flecha 2008). 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 gatherings (Aranda and Galindo 2009).

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 success (Duncan 2012; Lyons and Ray 2014; Reed and Vaughn 2012). However, they differ in the eight categories that were examined in the results section: participants, timelines, purpose, variants, coordination, moderation, books and their selection. For this reason, any organization 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 a second. 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 organizations 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.
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