

‘Boring, frustrating, impossible’: Tracing the negative affects of reading from Interviews to Story Circles

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Abstract:

How can you trace the negative affects¹ of reading experiences? Reading studies research often relies on heroic, transformational and celebratory narratives about reading elicited from research participants but also co-produced by the researchers because of the methods employed. In this essay we begin to build a counter-narrative about reading and reading studies research by investigating readers’ negative emotions through an experiment with a different method. After revisiting our earlier work with interviews and focus groups, we explore how and why we designed a participatory approach that employs aspects of the Story Circles method (Kurtz 2014). We contend that using a creative method that foregrounds the co-construction of narrative and interpretation and that explicitly encourages narrative as a type of performance enables both researchers and participants to explore a fuller range of emotions about reading experiences. This method also helps us to actively re-negotiate the positions of researcher and research subject.

Keywords: Reading, interviews, focus groups, Story Circles, Participatory Narrative Inquiry, qualitative methods

‘How do you trace the negative affects of reading?’ enquired our colleague and fellow scholar of reading, Shaf Towheed, after listening to a presentation about a web-based app we had made with a developer. The app (*Reading Lives*) was an experiment in re-presenting a qualitative dataset of adult readers from a bigger project. By making an app out of

readers' responses to a question on a questionnaire, we hoped to engage users' curiosity about the role that reading had played in other people's lives, and invite them to add their own brief reflections on their reading lives to the app. Unusually for our practice as researchers, we had not undertaken any type of analysis of the responses prior to making the app and testing it with readers at a series of specially created events. We had resisted categorizing, crunching or coding the data as part of either quantitative or qualitative methods for a number of reasons. In the presentation that Towheed heard, we explained why we had taken this approach to the data, and we shared some of the readers' responses with our colleagues. Our colleague astutely seized upon the positive skew of the dataset that appeared to reproduce celebratory and transformative narratives about reading experiences that are very familiar to reading studies' researchers. There were, nevertheless, a few expressions within our dataset that identified moments in readers' lives when reading was experienced as 'boring' or 'frustrating' or 'impossible.' In other words, negative experiences of and negative emotions towards or evoked by reading were articulated, but these were often embedded within more positive narratives about people's reading lives.

We understood the question 'how do you trace negative affects of reading?' as a provocation to action. What method or methods would enable us to gather new accounts of reading experiences from readers that would include the 'boring' or 'impossible' aspects? These negative emotions and experiences were the parts of the story that had generally been left out when we used methods like semi-structured interviews or focus groups. Over the course of four years, we experimented with various methods and forms of analysis in the hope of being able to give our colleague a sufficiently nuanced answer. This article explores one of these experiments – our adaptation of the Story Circle method (Kurtz 2014) – and contrasts it with our earlier employment of more traditional methods of qualitative interviewing. We begin by examining some of the ways we have worked with readers across more than fifteen years of our collaborative investigations into contemporary cultures of reading in North America and the United Kingdom. We consider how our employment of semi-structured interviews and focus groups was compromised by the aims of our early project work and the implicit framing of our engagement with readers. Revisiting those methods with the question about tracing negative affect as our focus, highlights how we failed to hear some of the more ambiguous and ambivalent elements in readers' accounts of their experiences. We do not, however, understand our adaptation of Story Circles as unproblematic nor as a perfect solution to the issues that we raise in the first part of our essay. All methods – including Story Circles – have their limitations, since they are inflected by researcher frameworks, investments and goals; issues of social difference and power inequities between researcher and participants, and among participants themselves; individual personalities and histories; and, in the case of focus groups, by group dynamics. We elaborate on these situations in the remainder of the essay as we examine our experiment with Story Circles. We reflect on its potential applications not only for reading studies, but also for audience studies in mitigating some of these issues.

In doing so, we want to highlight the common ground that those working in the fields of reading studies and audience studies share, not only in terms of investigative methods, but also in terms of a critical investment in understanding media users' relationships to different media and to each other.

By using the term 'experiment' to describe our adaptation of Story Circles, we do not intend to invoke a positivist paradigm where 'evidence' and repetition underscore the validity of results. Rather, we wish to signal the creativity that informs exploration, especially when we worry less about the results and attend more closely to the process of doing and making research with readers, other researchers and creative practitioners. Our experiments align in a broad sense with some of the aims of the 'serious games' invented by Beth Driscoll and Claire Squires (2018) for the purposes of eliciting the difficult-to-discern rules of literary festivals. Our inspirational model, however, is storytelling rather than games. Through our own more recent projects we are trying to create space for the often-unarticulated aspects of people's relationships to reading. We are also searching for ways of working with readers and with their accounts of reading that do not reproduce normative narratives about reading as an unquestionably 'good' activity. We want to challenge these since they are often part of reading researchers' frameworks of investigation – including our own. In relation to our experiment with Story Circles, we also sought to pilot an investigative method that lessens some of the difficulty of investigating struggles with or bad experiences of reading.

Our movement towards a research practice that is more iterative, more playful and as likely to fail as to succeed, is represented below by our efforts with Story Circles. We contend that using a method that involves storytelling (Lewis 2011), that explicitly encourages narrative as a type of performance, enables both researchers and participants to explore a fuller range of emotions about reading experiences. Additionally, we argue that this type of story elicitation usefully foregrounds the co-construction of narrative and interpretation in ways that actively de-centre the researchers from those processes (if not completely, then at least partially). Since Story Circles is group-based and participatory it departs from the common form of interviewing taken up by proponents of narrative methods (e.g. Squire et al. 2014), and the long form interview often favoured by oral historians of reading (Lyons 2014; Trower 2011; <https://memoriesoffiction.org/>). We are certainly not proposing that Story Circles is a fail-safe way of gathering readers' accounts or tracing negative affects of reading - nor even that our version of it entirely worked. Throughout this article we attempt to illustrate the ways the method worked for us, and also to identify the theoretical and practical challenges that need to be addressed, such as imbalances in power relations and practical restraints that are inherent in a method that involves multiple meetings with readers.

In addition to the potential that adaptations of Story Circles might offer to scholars working with readers and other media audiences in the contemporary period, our research speaks to wider methodological and epistemological concerns that are currently being explored within the humanities and social sciences. For some humanities scholars,

particularly those working out of literary studies, there is a turn towards sociological methods of enquiry, with interviewing a commonly employed mode that is finally coming under critical scrutiny as a method rather than its transcribed product being treated simply as another literary text equivalent to a creative work like a novel or poem (English & Felski 2010; Masschelein & Roach 2018). Meanwhile, among 'postqualitative' researchers in social science, there is a move in what, at first, might appear to be the opposite direction via modes of diffractive analysis (Barad 2007; Davies 2017). These practices of critique are an overt rejection of coding interview data by themes, a means of analysis, that, they argue, by identifying similarities and repetitions merely reproduces what we already know about the social world. The practitioners of diffractive analysis explore different ways of working with interview data that recognise the instability of meaning and the limitations for new knowledge of producing just one interpretation of data.

Intriguingly, examples of articles that employ diffractive analysis are recognisable to anyone in literary studies who was trained in Europe or North America during the mid- to late-1980s because while they are 'postqualitative' and 'posthumanist' in their rejection of a humanist liberal subjectivity, they are also informed by deconstruction. Diffractive analysis is also heavily influenced by concepts from the oeuvre of Deleuze and Guattari such as 'assemblages,' 'rhizomic thought' and the 'voice without organs' (e.g. Alexander & Wyatt 2018; Mazzei 2014). The result is often a multi-voiced and multi-authored piece of writing that moves continuously between data and theory, as researchers 'thread through or 'plug in' *data into theory into data*' (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012) resulting in multiplicity, ambiguity, and incoherent subjectivity' (Mazzei 2014, 743). While our own writing practice in this essay is much more conventional in terms of voice, narrative structure and argumentation, our adaptation of the Story Circle method shares some qualities with postqualitative research: not only does interpretation of data (in this case, readers' stories) become a collective process, it has no clear end-point or resolution. The multi-stage process of Story Circles also foregrounds the instability of meaning within an interview text, oral story and transcript by inviting participants to review, re-tell and re-interpret these narratives and artefacts. The participatory and dialogic aspects of Story Circles also have the potential to disrupt the role of the researchers as the directors of process and interpretation, while the overt invitations to tell a story and to give it a title foreground the performative dimensions of both the act of narration and the representation of subjectivity. In these respects, at least, Story Circles aligns more closely with postqualitative research and practice-as-research than it does with the qualitative methods we revisit below.

Reading Studies and Interview Methods: Skews, Frames, Aims

Reading studies research often produces heroic, transformational and celebratory narratives about reading elicited from research participants who are often, but not always, self-identified readers. Perhaps inevitably, researchers of reading (including ourselves) inflect their methods and manner with their own 'interestedness' (in the Bourdeusian sense – Bourdieu 1998, 77) and with their own 'passion for reading.' Both factors skew the

accounts that readers' give researchers about their reading experiences. Most contemporary research with adult leisure readers frames investigations of readers' relationship to reading in positive terms. Perhaps because of researchers' personal experiences and memories, most studies start with the assumption that reading is good for you, and that it is a pleasurable and worthwhile pursuit (Collinson 2009; Nell 1988; Radway 1991). Studies have focused on pleasure reading as a utilitarian means of, at least in part, improving reading proficiency (Beglar, Hunt, & Kite 2012; Constantino 2004), developing self-knowledge, sometimes alone and sometimes in the company of others, (Long 2003, 144-188; Ross 1999; Radway 1997; Sweeney 2010); creating community or enhancing social relations (Barstow 2003; Fuller 2011; Fuller & Rehberg Sedo 2013; Long 1992, 2003, 114-143; Ross, McKechnie, & Rothbauer 2018, 207-220), and gaining and negotiating cultural capital (Berg 2008; McHenry 2002; Radway 1991; Rehberg Sedo 2004). There are also studies that have looked at a wider range of responses and types of reading material (Kovač & van der Weel 2018; Twenge, Martin, & Spitzberg 2018), including readers in online fan communities (Martens 2016). Beth Driscoll and DeNel Rehberg Sedo (2018) have identified a range of emotions within *Goodreads* reviewer responses to international bestselling fiction and non-fiction titles. Other work has investigated reasons for not reading (Hodgson & Thompson 2000). With the significant exception of research into why specific groups of people do not read at all, or those who have been denoted as 'reluctant readers' (Dierking 2015; Miranda, Williams-Rossi, Johnson, & McKenzie 2011), it is rare to find research into contemporary reading experiences or cultures of reading from the English-speaking nation-states that generates any counter-narratives to the celebratory accounts. In a recent article Kathryne Bevilacqua underlines this issue when she calls for more attention to be paid to 'histories of nonreading, of struggling to read, of pretending to read, of being pursued by reading' (2018, 1132-3). Some scholars working on cultures of reading in the contemporary era are beginning to explore experiences of nonreading. The 'Reading On Screen' project, for example, employed digital storytelling methods that resonate with aspects of Story Circles (Thomas et al n.d.) and which elicited narratives from participants that sometimes included negative experiences and pressured acts of reading.

Many of the scholars cited in this brief overview of recent research employed interviewing as part of their investigations. The interview is a popular and flexible method with reading researchers because its form can accommodate various styles (e.g. structured, semi-structured, open-ended) and its design can be shaped through different methodologies and theories (e.g. narrative and narratology; feminist standpoint epistemology; intersectionality). However, interviews also exemplify the problems of positive framing and 'interest' of the reading researcher. Indeed, the majority of reading researchers who employ qualitative interviewing as part of their methods adopt various strategies in order to highlight or to foreground the ways in which their own expectations, desires, anxieties and framings shape the design, process, interpretations and outcomes of their studies. We'll use our experiences of focus group interviews to illustrate how our own

subjectivities and desires as researchers framed our study design, and our positionality within the interviews.

As part of the 'Beyond the Book' project (Fuller & Rehberg Sedo, 2013), and as one of our mixed methods (Fuller & Rehberg Sedo, 2012), we used focus groups, or what could alternatively be described as structured group interviews as a way of exploring readers' opinions about and their evaluation of mass reading events (MREs). We also undertook 72 semi-structured interviews with event organizers, and cultural producers. Our aims for the project, including our overall objective of investigating why people come together to share reading, implicitly assumed that engaging in reading was a positive act, whether as a solitary pursuit or as part of a social practice such as taking part in a public event within a One Book, One Community programme or participating in a TV book club. We were not aiming to capture particularly complex individual reading experiences through our methods because our research was more focussed on the ideological and cultural work that MREs were performing for organizers, publishers, city governments, television production companies, readers and the various agents who had an investment in what we came to conceptualise as 'the reading industry' (Fuller & Rehberg Sedo 2013, 15-9).

Our focus group interview approach to working with readers foregrounded aspects of interviews that can be challenging or limiting, especially with regard to the collection of complex accounts about reading experiences that include negative feelings and negative tropes. Our focus group interviews were a hybrid form which combined the structured interview with the purpose and format of a focus group intended to solicit readers' opinions about MREs (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). As we've discussed elsewhere, the format of ninety-minute directed conversation with groups of five to eight readers was also well suited to the emphasis of the 'Beyond the Book' project on the social practices of reading (Fuller & Rehberg Sedo, 2013, 259-94; Fuller 2019 forthcoming). The format of our focus groups coincided with their function in our research, which was to find out what readers thought about events and programmes that in turn emphasised notions of community and social connection. However, the limitations of this method include: tight time parameters and a question protocol that require moderators to keep the conversation moving around the members of the group so that everyone's opinion can be heard; the directive power and positionality of the moderators in relation to the participants, and the danger that one or two participants will dominate and that other group members will end up agreeing with their opinions even if they hold a different view (Myers 1998; Peek & Fothergill 2009; Roulston 2006). In our work with readers, these limitations also forestalled participant's efforts to expand upon their responses. During a semi-structured interview with an individual reader, it is often possible to pause and to prompt the interviewee to reflect further on a thought or to clarify what they mean by a phrase, thereby enabling moments of explicit co-construction of meaning to occur. While the interviewer remains the primary interpreter of the interview data, especially after the interview has finished, the interviewee has opportunities to take back explanatory power. Those opportunities for readers to re-

interpret their own words or to introduce a new topic are diminished in a focus group interview situation.

As we moved through the eleven geographical sites of the 'Beyond the Book' project, we incorporated a few prompts that would enable us to achieve saturation with regard to specific themes that had emerged in earlier parts of the research. One prompt in particular underlined our already existing skew towards the expression of positive emotions associated with experiences of reading and reading events. Listening for expressions of 'pleasure', and prompting readers to describe that 'pleasure' in more detail become an imperative aspect of our focus group protocol because we were determined to push beyond superficial statements that MREs were 'fun' or that reading was 'pleasurable.' But in our quest to learn more about readers' comprehensions of those terms and to develop a conceptualisation of pleasure grounded in readers' experience of shared reading, we curtailed our ability to follow up on hints about the difficult moments of their reading lives – or even to recognise those hints when they were articulated. This tendency was compounded by the fact that our warm-up questions were the most open ones on our protocol but we allowed their function – to help put people at their ease – to trump their content. For example, when asked to introduce herself by telling us what kinds of books she read and to reflect on the question 'why do you read?', Marjorie from Halifax, Nova Scotia, said:

I like to read – for pleasure – but I don't read that often for pleasure. I read, I tend to read books that either my younger daughter is reading because I want to know what she is reading and try to understand her mind... Or, my older daughter because she'll say, 'Mom, I think you would really like this book,' but lately I find I've been struggling to get through the books that she brings home to me. And the last one that I got through, to be perfectly honest I can't even remember that much about it, just that it was kind of confusion, the way it was written.

Marjorie offers some tantalising insights into both her motivations for reading (to understand her daughters and to have books in common that can be the grounds for conversation) but she also speaks explicitly about struggling to read and remember certain books because of their formal properties ('confusion ... the way it was written'). If time and interview format had permitted, we could have asked Marjorie to elaborate on her feelings of 'confusion' and on 'the way it was written,' but instead we simply thanked her and moved on to the next participant.

We may have missed out on some rich and layered narratives about our participant's reading lives, but the semi-structured interviews with cultural intermediaries and the focus group interviews with readers were adequate as methods for the research questions and aims that we had at the time we were investigating MREs. Reflecting upon their design, skews, and frames over a decade later helps to foreground the limitations that those

methods can have for gathering accounts of reading experiences. Our desires and expectations for specific responses did not allow for the complex and contradictory emotions that readers may ascribe to their reading, especially if they are adult readers reflecting upon different life stages.

Nothing made this latter point clearer to us than our experiments with another dataset from the 'Beyond the Book' project, namely the responses to the fifth question in our online questionnaire aimed at readers: 'What role has reading played in your life? [Write up to 250 words].'² The role reading plays (RRP) dataset was something of a conundrum at the time of collection (2005-7), and, as noted above, we did not categorise or code the responses. After setting the RRP data aside for several years, we returned to it in 2012. The dataset became a catalyst for a series of cross-disciplinary and cross-arts experiments that began with the making of a web-based app, *Reading Lives (RL)*, built with developer Tim Hodson (<http://readinglives.org>). During 2013-14 we tested *RL* with readers at special events co-produced with staff from Writing West Midlands, the literature development organisation for central England. Although *Reading Lives* was our starting point for a far more creative approach to investigating contemporary readers and cultures of reading, methods that included making and building digital tools, and testing, failing and re-making them (Fuller, 2019 forthcoming), our experiment with *RL* was a failure in two specific ways that are relevant here. First, we failed to collect much additional data about how people felt about the role reading played in their lives, and second, we did not gain much insight into the RRP responses, although some of our tester's comments were suggestive when it came to issues of genre and authorship.

Our second experiment with the RRP dataset in the summer of 2016 involved using three tools from applied linguistics: AntConc, a concordance programme; Wmatrix, which enables metaphor analysis, and SentiStrength, which evaluates emotions along a scale. This experiment also seemed to be a failure because the results were neither definitive nor statistically plausible. Furthermore, this experiment in analysis was not particularly successful in terms of our quest to trace negative affect, although it did underline the skew of our RRP dataset towards celebratory, life-affirming accounts of the role reading plays in readers' lives. The confirmation that our RRP data associated positive emotions with reading made us think again about how we might elicit more emotionally complex accounts of reading from research subjects. The experiment's other minor success lay in the provision of clues or hints that informed the first stage (prompt-making, see **Appendix 1**) of our Story Circles adaptation in December 2017. In particular, the idea that reading provides 'escape' from everyday life and can take the reader to another world or place took on a more literalized form in the prompt: 'Imagine you are deep in the woods in a cabin with no phone etc. but a really big bookcase and you browse and pick something to read. Tell us about your experience.' The tendency of readers to write about their reading lives and understand its value metaphorically in terms of 'time spent' was influential in the shaping of the prompt: 'Imagine you have a free afternoon and choose to read. What happens in your story?' In the

end, then, what the experiment in applied linguistics produced for us was a creative jumping-off point for our adaptation of Participatory Narrative Inquiry (Story Circles).

Researching with Readers Differently: The Story Circles Experiment

DeNel learned about Story Circles from a colleague who was using it to better understand rape culture on a nearby campus. The Story Circle method was originally developed by researchers as a way of working with people who belong to the same community (e.g. a village; a women's shelter; a university campus) in order to tackle a social problem (e.g. dwindling natural resources; how to improve safety for children in a women's shelter or students on campus). In other words, the original context for Story Circles is community-based, participatory research. According to Cynthia Kurtz (2014), a storytelling method of inquiry includes three essential phases: Collection (of stories); Sensemaking (of stories told); and, Return ('What has been gathered and produced in the first two phases is returned to the community and enters into collective discourse') (87). In our adaptation, or version, of Story Circles we had four stages. Stage 1 consisted of creating story prompts that encourage people to tell stories about their reading experiences (see **Appendix 1**). The group responsible for creating the prompts was a mix of students and researchers interested in reading and exploring alternative research methods. In Stage 2 we asked people who identify both as readers and non-readers to share their stories in small groups of five or six (see Appendix 2). Participants were asked to choose two or three prompts that would inform their shared stories. In each group, the researcher and other participants gave probes or prompts, such as, 'and then what happened?' In one group each member told only one story, and in the other, participants told more than one story. The groups then had to choose one story that they wanted to share in the larger group.

Stage 3 had everyone return to a big group, and one participant from each small group shared the story selected by their group. Within the large group, the stories were given titles. Themes, consistencies and inconsistencies were teased out by the entire group. These themes and ideas were written on a whiteboard by one of the researchers. Each participant then added to the board by writing a word or phrase directly on the board or by placing a sticky note underneath a theme. Stages 2 and 3 were audio-recorded and transcribed. For Stage 4, we wrote a report (see **Appendix 3**) that featured some of the stories and the conversation about them that had occurred in Stage 3, using the transcripts that were produced from the audio-recordings. The report was circulated to all the original participants and selected other colleagues (graduate and faculty) on DeNel's campus. We then held an hour-long virtual meeting with 5 volunteers who were invited to reflect on different aspects of the report and the Story Circle process (see **Appendix 3** and below for the questions that we asked).

The Story Circle method, developed originally by Cynthia Kurtz (2014), intrigued us from the outset: as our description above implies, it was interactive and participant-centred in a way that neither semi-structured interviews nor focus group interviews allowed for, and the process appeared to be one that would allow readers to, quite literally, tell their stories

more fully and more imaginatively. The latter aspect of Story Circles was especially appealing to us since we were trying to evolve ways of enabling people to share all types of reading experiences, both positive and negative, and to express a fuller range of emotions and emotional responses than we had typically heard in our early research. As Kurtz argues, the Story Circle method is not appropriate for all research quandaries or problems; she has written the book for 'decision support projects' (86), or more specifically, for not-for-profit organisations, communities and businesses.

Selecting and adapting aspects of Story Circles for our sociological inquiry into reading practices was thus a bit of a lateral manoeuvre, and certainly a swerve away from Kurtz's research terrain. But this swerve was in keeping with both our experimental turn, and our research question about tracing negative affect.

As we noted above, 'Boredom,' 'frustration,' 'confusion,' and 'engagement' are some of the emotions that readers in the RRP database expressed and are, in part, the responses that set us on our journey with Story Circles. We note, however, that psychology researchers have identified emotional responses with different durations: long-term (hours or days) emotional traits and moods of readers (Meyer & Turner, 2006; Pekrun, 2006) as well as moment-to-moment (Graesser & D'Mello, 2012) responses to reading from learners. These quantitative studies correspond with the wider range of emotions that we anticipated readers would experience. Our Story Circles project takes us deeper into (1) how these emotions are remembered, (2) how they morph when told as stories, and (3) how these emotions and stories morph further when collectively interpreted. As we examine in more detail below, our adaptation of Story Circles not only helped us to achieve our research aim, but also foregrounded issues about interpretation, power, narrative, and performance in ways that illustrate generative differences between this method and more traditional qualitative focus group and individual interviews.

The Co-construction of Narrative and Interpretation

Our collection of stories began with a workshop on creating story prompts. Along with our research assistant, Md Inzamal Hossain Rakib, we sent invitations to undergraduate and graduate students, staff and faculty of Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. We also invited the colleague who had used the method at another local university. In all of our recruitment communication, we emphasised that we wanted to work with people who consider themselves readers and those who do not, and those who are interested or have an investment in reading and reading studies. In this respect, our recruitment advertisements were more explicit about the frames of our research project and more precise about who we imagined the participants might be than those we designed for the BTB focus group interviews. As we hoped, the story prompt creation group consisted of a range of our target participants, and even included people who don't identify as readers at this particular stage of their life. We continued this strategy of articulating the framing of the research by telling the group about our RRP database, and our desires to broaden our knowledge about the range of emotions people experience towards reading.

We provided an overview of the Story Circles method, and asked everyone to help us create story prompts that would guide such an endeavour.

From this very first stage, then, Story Circles are different from traditional focus groups and interviews. Story prompts are created, in part, by the participants themselves who thus play an overt role in the creation of the project. Unlike the process of devising an interview protocol, workshopping the generation of story prompts collaboratively within a group required us to give up some of our directorial control of the process and to be open to the creation of storytelling prompts that we might not want, like or even deem suitable for our research question about tracing negative affect. Even so, our research goals and our investment in eliciting a wider range of stories about reading experiences framed the workshop. There was a tension between the parameter we constructed through those desires and investments, and the creative agency given to workshop participants. Facilitating the workshop process was difficult at the beginning, and especially because we were meeting on a very cold early December morning with Danielle attending online. We were used to creating questions that would elicit responses, but we were not familiar with prompting a story out of research participants. We were literally learning about the method alongside the participants – a circumstance which, although it felt uncomfortable, actually contributed to a more horizontal group structure in which our power and status as researchers was barely relevant because we had little expertise to display.

The focus of our workshop was to try to avoid creating prompts that would encourage participants in Stages 2 and 3 to provide only opinions or display attitudes (our emphasis in our *Beyond the Book* focus group interviews), and instead encourage the telling of stories that would illustrate feelings and emotions. We note here that participants' opinions and attitudes are usually inflected by their emotions (and vice-versa). Moreover, emotions may be made evident in a focus group interview focussed on opinion-gathering through, for example tone of voice and non-verbal gestures. Rather than create a false dichotomy between emotion and opinion, we wanted to shift the emphasis towards the expression of affects of reading by using a method that would legitimate negative as well as positive emotions and experiences. We hoped to get a wide range of reaction to reading experiences, not only those that were celebratory. Hence, 'Imagine that...', 'Tell me about...' 'Describe a time when...' became the phrases that began most of our 11 story prompts for the next step (Stage 2) of our story collection process. (See **Appendix 1**)

For Stage 2, we recruited people from across campus who identify both as readers and non-readers to share their stories, including the people who participated in the prompt-creation workshop. Eleven people participated in this story telling stage of our project. After a brief introduction with all participants, we broke into two small groups of five and six participants. (See **Appendix 2**) Kurtz offers multiple recommendations for gathering stories (2014, 187-213), and we chose the 'Twice-told Stories' method because Kurtz recommends this straightforward process to researchers new to Participatory Narrative Inquiry (464-6). In separate spaces, participants were asked to choose two or three prompts that would inform their shared stories. 'Think about your first memory and experience of reading. What

happened?’ was the story prompt that inspired the most stories across both groups. ‘Tell us about a time you wanted to read and couldn’t do it. What happened?’ and ‘Describe a time when you were really excited about reading something. Or perhaps you were totally put off by the idea of reading. What happened?’ were also popular prompts, and all resulted in stories of childhood memories.

Story Circles offer opportunities for readers and those who read but don’t explicitly identify as readers to share reading experiences that they usually have not shared before. The prompts direct participants towards scenarios but allow for choice in terms of the memory or experience that a teller chooses to narrate. The style of the storytelling is up to the individual and, at best, the process allows sufficient time for stories of different lengths to be told. In contrast to a focus group interview, the Story Circle group members in our Stages 2 and 3 – not the researchers – controlled the pace, length and flow of storytelling.

Who participates in the circles will, of course, influence the stories that are told, and so it is important at this point to outline the parameters of our groups and situate them in their particular geographical, cultural and educational contexts. The success of these particular Story Circles may be attributed in part to the prevalence of oral storytelling as an everyday practice in the Maritime region of Canada. Maritimers give authority, generally, to the storytellers, but oral culture does not have the same legitimacy across all parts of Canada or across all cultural groups. While we did not collect demographic data on this occasion, we learned through their stories that the eleven participants were from various cultural and national backgrounds: two were from Bangladesh, one was from Ghana, and the others were from various parts of Canada. We did not invite class self-identification, but all the participants possess at least an undergraduate-level university education. Many of them were upper level undergraduate or graduate students aged between 20 and 52; also in attendance were two faculty members and two staff members. Nine women and two men participated.

All of the participants knew that they would be asked to tell their own stories, and to do it in front of others. While this is often the norm in senior undergraduate and graduate courses, it isn’t always the case outside of the academy. Some people might struggle to create a story out of their experiences, which would mandate a more active role for the facilitator. As it turned out in our groups, the participants were extremely willing to tell their stories and did so with flair, using jokes, gestures and vocal variation as parts of their performance. These overtly performative strategies not only made the process entertaining for those involved, but they also foregrounded the dialogic dynamic of being in a group of tellers and listeners. In constructing and performing a story, the participants also explicitly enacted processes that are implicit in all interview situations.

We recognize, however, that the difference between a one-on-one interview setting and that of a group can be great for those who are shy or introverted. Additionally, storytelling circles have the potential to reproduce power inequalities that result from social privilege based on, for example, race, class and gender. A potential limitation for the Story Circles method is that those with more privilege, social confidence or performative skill will

have their voices and stories heard and selected at the expense of participants who are less privileged, shy or who might struggle to put their experience into words.

These challenges could be mitigated to some extent through using smaller groups or pairs for the first stage of storytelling, or through creative methods such as drawing or by enabling participants to audio-record their story on their own using cellphone technology. Engineering of the groups to address differences in power and social privilege could also be a useful tool, especially if participants were invited, in advance of the Circles, to self-identify themselves demographically in terms of class, race and gender. Questions about people's comfort levels regarding talking in groups, and sharing aspects of their experiences with strangers and friends might also enable researchers to organize the stages of Story Circles in ways that better facilitate the telling of everyone's stories. For example, we were sure to separate the graduate students from faculty members who were their teachers, even though their coursework was finished. However, we acknowledge that while the Story Circle method can lessen the unequal power hierarchy between researcher and participants, it can also heighten the inequities among the participants. When the researchers are working with or seek to work with groups that are more heterogeneous than ours, it becomes even more important to address the potential for the method to reproduce social privilege. Nonetheless, it may not be possible to mitigate for all the ways that social privilege, personality and competency could inflect the style, reception and selection of the stories told and shared.

The stories told in our experiment varied in mood and tone, and involved the expression of a range of emotions and tales that often related more than one act or experience of reading. Participants clearly did not feel compelled to tell only positive stories about their reading experiences, and the format allowed for reflection upon their relationship to reading but did not demand it in the way that an interviewer might prompt for it. One woman reflected on learning to read early, and then wanting to turn her ability off when it became overwhelming. Another told the story of coming to reading for pleasure while in university, having rejected it over sports during his entire youth. One person told the story of struggling with reading while she was being taught to read by her Bangladeshi grandfather (see the Report in **Appendix 3**).

If they did not refer back to childhood memories, participants shared immediate or very recent stories. One female graduate woman, for example, told a story about a recent experience when she started reading on her phone and was 'swept away'. We don't know the material she was reading, but it offered her an escape from the more onerous task of reading for her graduate classes:

It was the story and how he told them. And I guess, also reading it during a time when I had so much boring stuff (laughing)... sorry, not boring, but hard stuff to read! I felt like, it was good, like it was light and... it was... what should I call it... relaxation, or therapeutic.

Here, we see hints at negative experiences of reading, but only as a comparison to her positive experience of 'light' reading for 'relaxation'.

With little prompting, all participants asked questions of the teller after each story was shared. Nearly every participant in both small groups took an active role in the process, which might be a result of the comfort they felt with each other (at least two people in each group knew each other) and/or the norm of participation that is established in university seminar settings. In direct contrast to a focus group interview, the researchers infrequently interjected into the conversation, and instead, it was the other participants who pushed the stories further with questions such as, 'So, it's almost like that was your routine. That one thing that you do every morning. I am wondering, what did it do for you and what did it mean to start the day that way?' was asked of a woman who told a story about losing delivery of the *Globe & Mail*, a Canadian national daily.

Sometimes, however, we as researchers had to urge the storyteller to continue. In the first instance, it was usually with the phrase, 'and then what happened?' That one small group told fewer stories than the other might be a result of the difference between the researchers assigned to each group: DeNel was more familiar with focus group and individual interviewing than was our research assistant, Rakib. In this situation, having more experience in qualitative methods could be considered a hindrance. DeNel was conscious of trying not to be too directive, and did not prompt as much as she could have done. Because Rakib has little interview experience, he followed Kurtz's suggestion to push the stories further with questions that sought out emotional reactions or reflected traditional story elements, such as setting, character, and timing rather than seeking clarification of what he was hearing (423-4). Analyzing aspects of the act of narration that encourage a story to be developed is another means through which this method, unlike a more traditional semi-structured interview or a focus group, foregrounds the mediation of experience through language. Moreover, the co-construction of narrative and of meaning within the group is deliberately activated through the follow-up prompts. Rakib's group asked more questions of one another than did DeNel's, which led to more stories being shared in her group but perhaps not as detailed as those stories told in Rakib's. Both these aspects of Story Circles have the epistemological effect of lending agency to the teller as a knowledge-maker, while simultaneously destabilising the status of their story as a straightforward or singular representation of knowledge and experience. That said, there is still the possibility that extrovert or socially privileged members of a group may be more likely to pose questions and to use prompts than shy or less socially privileged participants.

Dynamics and Positionality of Readers and Researchers in Story Circles

The process of interpretation in the Story Circles method is also different from traditional focus groups or interviews with the participants having far more involvement in making meaning from the stories (or 'data'). Kurtz calls this the Sensemaking Phase (361-384), and so at the end of an hour and a half, we asked the groups to collectively choose one story that they wanted to share back with the larger group. This process adds another layer to the

collective interpretation that began with the story prompt-making workshop. Without too much direction from the facilitators, participants are left to themselves to determine *which* story gets shared. However, directives from researchers had some influence on the process. In Rakib's small group, the participants were reminded that the overall project was investigating 'mostly emotions', and that reminder directed the 'choosing a story to share' discussion. DeNel gave no directive to the group she facilitated. Cueing or allowing participants to choose the story to share as they collectively wish has an influence on participant's agency. The sensemaking process in Rakib's group began when each participant started interpreting the emotions felt and expressed in each other's stories. Here is a taste of the conversation in that group, which is referring to the story of learning to read with a grandfather's help, mentioned above:

For me, it is [Participant's] story, the emotional aspect, and the connections of generations around reading, and learning to read. And that whole world of reading opening up because you know you have this connection with your parent and grandparent. And that's something that really resonates. To me, that's very emotional, I mean that's a real emotional moment I remember as well. Like I remember my father reading to me, and with me reading to my children. So, that to me resonated on an emotional level.

In DeNel's small group, discussion was focused on trying to find consistencies or rather, representativeness in the stories. As illustrated in the differences between the two groups, the Story Circles model gives those taking part the flexibility to employ different criteria for shared story sharing and interpretation. The participants have different levels of agency in this part of the process, which is dependent upon the researcher leading the discussion. In other groups, this could be adapted with different cues, or by not using any cues at all.

After each group had a casual lunch and had chosen the story that would be shared, everyone returned to the big group. One participant from each small group shared their story. As part of this sensemaking process, DeNel led a discussion about giving each of the stories a title. When the title was collectively created, DeNel asked the story teller for feedback about the naming of their story, which provided the storyteller an opportunity to clarify or further the collective reception of his or her story. As part of the naming discussion and subsequent talk, the entire group teased out themes, consistencies and inconsistencies. DeNel wrote these themes, etc. on a whiteboard. Notably, the themes were more diffuse than if we had done this activity as reading researchers with our preconceived categories about the types of narratives readers construct about their experiences. Each participant then added to the board by writing a word or phrase directly on it or by placing a sticky note underneath a theme, which illuminated different ways of thinking about reading and about the interpretations of stories about reading experiences.

The common themes in the shared stories likely were influenced not only by what the participants heard in these sensemaking discussions, but also by what the participants

heard and discussed within their own small groups. The themes are not radically different from what we would have heard in our focus groups, but the participants identified different emotions. In addition, the labeling of the themes came from the participants with confirmation from the researchers. Indeed, DeNel remembers trying to comment as little as possible as she was taking theme ideas from the participants and writing them on the boards.

The themes that the group identified were: 1) REVERB/INTERNAL NARRATOR; 2) UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE; 3) PHYSICAL COPY OF BOOKS; 4) EBB AND FLOW TO READING ; and, 5) DRIVING FORCES. The negative affects of reading can be seen in the words or phrases the participants posted under most themes. Under Reverb/Internal Narrator, for example, not-necessarily-positive words included 'language differences,' 'voices in your head,' 'dyslexia,' 'learning difficulties,' and 'loss of interest/passion'. Under the Driving Forces theme, the participants noted 'Academic vs personal reading choices #habermas,' 'Forced academic stories,' and 'Required' as descriptors or illustrations of the stories they heard.

What we find most striking about the themes and ideas is that the binary organisation of positive and negative poles does not directly map on to the reading experiences that were described. This is most evident in the theme Ebb and Flow to Reading. For the participants 'Ebb and Flow' referred to different reading experiences during different life stages, and also to the ebb and flow of feelings, sensation and attention within each reading experience (from, for example, the good to the bad or from easy to difficult). The theme had listed under it suggestive commentary about the social and institutional pressures that people had experienced in relation to reading: 'Teachers + family shaping children as readers or non-readers does more harm than good to identify formation + sense of self-worth. It's not a static trait. Or all that important,' 'Addiction,' 'Novel types change over time,' 'Interest change,' 'Reading requires discipline, coverage, curiosity, integrity, empathy, open-mindedness, patience, love, endurance, commitment, passion, breath (ing), and life,' and 'Age/life circumstances.' The participants themselves highlighted that which they thought was negative under this theme with 'Negative: Someone telling you that the way you enjoy reading is not as valid/impressive (reading novel vs. reading comics.)' and 'Negative: Being forced to read something for work or academic purposes. Someone telling you to read something you don't want to.'

The levels of comfort the participants had with each other after story telling in their individual small groups, sharing lunch, and choosing their stories to share in addition to coming back together and naming stories through often humorous, yet serious discussion, led to not only new knowledge from our researchers' perspective, but also, new ways of thinking about reading for the participants themselves. Very rarely are interviews or focus group data returned to participants for the interpretive process or for confirmation of conclusions, but in the Story Circle method, this is an imperative part of the work being done.

An ‘unbroken chain of storytelling’: eliciting a fuller range of emotions about reading experiences

The final phase of our project was a combination of Kurtz’s sensemaking and reporting back phases. We decided to do this because we were so intrigued with what had come out of the Stage 2 storytelling sensemaking session. We are quite comfortable with analysing and interpreting interview and focus group data but recognized an opportunity for different knowledge creation with the Story Circle method. We wanted to push the process further to see what more would come of the stories if we shared them with other and more community members as Kurtz recommends (493-4). We also felt that sharing the report and discussing it through another round of sensemaking with those interested in reading studies was, in a sense, ‘reporting back’. Again, we invited participants from the previous stages and also included others whom we knew might have an interest and investment in reading and reading studies. The people who joined in this discussion were sent the Report that the research team created after Stages 1 and 2, and asked to read and reflect upon the contents before the meeting. (See **Appendix 3**) In the report we asked the participants to consider the method as we had employed it, a sample of the stories shared, and importantly, we provided questions for them to contemplate:

What do you think are the themes in the stories?

What consistencies and inconsistencies do you see in these stories?

What do you think these stories tell us about the emotional experiences of reading?

Do you have any questions or comments about the Story Circles research method?

The group consisted of two participants from the original storytelling circles, one graduate student from the Faculty of Education, and the research team attending this meeting, and so both Danielle (who had not been part of the storytelling exercises) and one other person had not heard the same set of stories or all parts of the process.

The striking result of this phase is the critical depth that the participants brought to the interpretive process. We think that the online platform of Blackboard Collaborate and the dynamic of the group played a strong role in the richness of the discussion. The Collaborate software is a course management and communication tool that allows for only two people to have the microphone at once. It also has other optional features such as an open text chat box (which we chose to use so that people could comment without interrupting the speaker) and a ‘hands up’ button that a participant can use to indicate that they have something to say. In other words, the affordances of this particular online platform demands that one person at a time talk, and so when we asked questions, the attendees presented their responses without interruption. Unlike the focus groups that we are accustomed to, this group did not simply agree with one another. The follow up discussion was polite and thoughtful. Although the turn taking and the good manners are often part of focus group discussion, in this group there was a ‘spirit of inquiry’ in the talk;

participants were respectful of one another's interpretations and used rational arguments to express themselves. We believe that the depth and civility of the conversation is a result of two participants knowing one another through graduate classes, and perhaps because each person had time to read through the report beforehand to prepare their answers. Also influential to the dynamic and the results of the discussion is that all participants were graduate students or had been graduate students, and they approached the task professionally and intellectually. They were an expert stakeholder group with an investment in the topic under discussion, which is different from a one-off focus group where participants may have some investment in the topic or issue but not necessarily at a professional level. Our group members were explicitly interested in the method. We determined this fact at the beginning of the conversation with an opening question about their motivations for joining this phase of the Story Circles. Asking this question upfront provided a specifically explicit frame that seemed to enable the group members to talk freely.

Making sense collectively is what especially differentiates this method from others. Because two group members had been through the story sharing and initial sensemaking phase – one of them had also been involved with creating the prompts – and because making sense collectively was highlighted in the report, it was not a surprise to us when the participants identified the richness of the method. What was surprising was the enjoyment the collaboration created. One participant, for example, said that he enjoyed Stages 1 and 2, and that he especially was interested in the storyteller at the centre of the process. Those who were part of the initial stages commented on how the method can enable a playfulness and creativity among participants, including jokes, improvisation and creative use of language. For instance, during the first two stages, and discussed at length in the initial sensemaking phase, one group adapted song titles for story titles inspired by the tale of the build-up to a group outing to an Aerosmith concert and the simultaneous intensive reading of a Harry Potter novel. These group members also identified another difference between what we've experienced in focus groups and those of Story Circles: the flow of the conversation. Rakib noted how the prompts were 'thoughtful' and enabled 'almost flawless telling' in the circles as well as collaboration: 'we went in circles and kept going around and all people contributed,' he said. 'It was 'an unbroken chain of storytelling'.' Rakib's observations reiterate how this method gave agency to our participants and how it can operate relatively democratically and organically. This might not be the case, however, in other groups with greater diversity and heterogeneity than ours.

The results of the collective interpretation that occurred in Stage 3 do not provide an exhaustive or definitive list of themes, which is something that we have come to think of as a positive aspect of the Story Circles method. What results is quite rich interpretative work when a participant gives a rationale for choosing or ascribing meaning to a specific theme. As an example, during the initial discussion of themes, Rakib talked about how 'struggle was a part of identification but also it was overcome', in Story 3, but he noted there were 'elements of childhood trauma' around reading and that 'negative feelings remained.' He

said that these negative feelings made him think about how struggles with reading can 'haunt you' much later in life. And as part of the same discussion, another male participant noted that 'all [the stories] were about strong memories, emotional memories.' They were about 'formative experiences which carried a lot of emotional weight and affected the participant's description which effected their reading as a whole.'

While the group members initially tried to attribute themes to all of the stories, it was during a second round of conversation that they differentiated among the *types* of 'reading stories'. One woman first identified an overall theme as 'reading ... woven into our lives so deeply and our deep attachment to it and aversion to it at various points in life.' Another female participant said that the stories showed us a common theme of reading as an identity-forming practice; 'knowing what was going on in the world was important,' there were extra-textual connections, connection through the text, and 'connection to a real world,' but this contrasted to the Harry Potter story which was about 'a connection to a fictional world.' By attributing different themes to different stories, the participants also identified less positive emotions: Struggle (story about learning to read); Frustration; Nostalgia for time in life that was special; and, Longing and grieving.

During the discussion about the method itself, we were again offered an insight that we wouldn't have necessarily considered ourselves. Story Circles enable aspects of oral storytelling to be brought into a direct relationship with experiences of print reading or, at least, giving accounts of those print reading experiences of reading to others. One member commented astutely that the report version of the stories had less affect, and certainly the fun and lightheartedness were lost in transcription. Indeed, there were a number of comments about how the stories took on a different tone or mood once they had been transcribed. Those people who had been part of the Stage 2 were struck by how the humour had been evacuated from the transcriptions and by the loss of teller-audience/listener response/dynamic (some of which would have been non-verbal). The interpretations of the stories are influenced by how they were first received. For example, the one graduate student who was not part of the initial story circles said of Story 3, 'it's a story about mastery of reading, the emphasis is on becoming a good, skilled reader whereas in the other stories, reading has already been mastered.' But another member who heard the very first telling of the story argued that the emphasis was on the relationship between the grandfather and the storyteller. She described it as a 'very, very emotional story' because of 'the way the story was related/told ... the speaker's voice, the expression on her face'. The conversation, and especially the multiple ways the story was interpreted, signalled for us a type of 'post-qualitative' research moment that illustrates the instability of meaning and the potential for new knowledge production when moving beyond only one interpretation.

The Story Circles method encourages the participants to critically reflect on their own sensemaking practices and involvement in the process. We heard this in the disparity in story interpretation, which was not only expressed among the group members, but also by individuals who had experienced the various phases. One man noted the 'discrepancy between his own memory of his experience in the circles and his experience of reading the

transcripts.’ He also said that his ‘interpretations of the stories don’t always map onto other people’s in this group.’ These ideas illustrate again another potential benefit of this method for Reading Studies: it could be a way of exploring different interpretations of reading experiences without resolving those differences or collapsing them into one interpretation, which is often the role of the researchers.

Concluding Discussion

Adapting the Story Circles method enabled us to pursue the provocation about tracing negative affects of reading and to do so in a way that felt exciting, imaginative and less predictable than other ways of gathering readers’ accounts of their experiences. It held to the spirit of our creative endeavours since the RRP dataset resisted our more traditional modes of analysis. It also tested our nerve as researchers to do something new and give up some of our control over the process once we had set each stage going. Additionally, there were sensations and emotions that were important to our own experiences of the Story Circles: the coldness of the December day in 2017 when we did the story prompt workshop and the awkwardness of that taking place mostly in person but also (for Danielle) remotely and online in the middle of a busy day; our shared understanding and anxiety that we were flying by the seat of our pants with no checklist or question protocol to fall back on; DeNel’s bodily discomfort during Stages 1 and 2 as participants spun stories and made jokes about titles – and nobody needed her to do or say anything; Danielle’s disappointment at not being there for that part but then the enjoyment of hearing about it from DeNel in person on a warm, sunny afternoon in the back garden in Edmonton about a week later; and the weirdly comforting alignment of the online platform (Collaborate) with the format of Stage 3 as its affordances emphasised turn-taking.

We are not claiming that doing Story Circles was a radical ontological shift for us compared to the more traditional methods we have employed, but we were definitely more aware of the way its effects and affects were registered in our bodies. Part of the reason for this awareness was the shift in our positionality as researchers that we experienced not only intellectually, in terms of the lessening of our interpretive authority and control, but also spatially, in the way that we became ‘just’ another member of a series of circles. The Story Circles method, or rather our adaptation of it, placed us into relationships with our research participants that might be described as more horizontal and somewhat less hierarchical than we had experienced during semi-structured interviews or as moderators of focus groups.

More familiar to us as researchers whose investigations and creative collaborations are usually concerned with reading as a social practice, Story Circles is a socially dynamic mode of inquiry that depends on social relations and connections being made (however tentatively and temporarily) among participants. Unlike most styles of qualitative interviewing or focus groups, the communication that occurs in the various stages of Story Circles is less mediated through the bodies and verbal cues of the researchers. We believe it is *less* mediated because of the participatory nature of the method even though one can

never fully avoid the ways in which the researcher and the participants shape the design, execution, and outcome of the study in any method of interactive research. The interactive and dialogic aspects of storytelling and sensemaking are also less dependent on the expert knowledge and accrued experience of a researcher-facilitator than they are in traditional modes of inquiry like semi-structured interviews. Moreover, the staged process operates as an overt signposting for the acts of narrative construction and interpretation, two aspects of qualitative interviewing that are always in play but rarely explicitly acknowledged as they are taking place. Within the parameters of an explicitly framed and staggered research process, participants have more interpretive agency. The participatory elements of Story Circles give permission to the people involved to both tell a story and to guide how someone else tells theirs by prompting; to choose a story prompt and a style of narration, and to alter it, if they wish, in the second stage of the process; to negotiate with other group members about the title and themes, and (in Stage 3) to revisit and make sense of the stories again. Of course, enabling readers to be storytellers, to perform a narrative, to be an active listener, to label and analyse what they have heard and read, does not eliminate issues of unequal power dynamics within a group or the researchers' role as the organizers of the investigation and (at least in our trial of Story Circles) the primary beneficiaries of it.

We should also note other constraints and limits to using versions of Story Circles as a method. Intellectually, we struggled to adapt Kurtz's model for the field of reading studies because her work is characterised by action-based, participative research that is focussed upon problem-solving within communities that are often territorially locatable. Although we formed a loose, institutionally-located 'community' of participants for our experiment, we were not aiming to solve a social problem or to co-produce policy with community members. Instead, we had a research question ('how do you trace negative affects of reading?') and a research method problem ('how could we gather more emotionally complicated accounts of reading experiences?'). In other words, we wrested Story Circles out of its usual context and we diverted its purpose to the domain of academic research where, as investigators, we would benefit most. Unlike those who participate in action-based research, the people we worked with were not gaining anything material for their community by joining our story circles or 'returning' the stories in Stage 3. We could have mirrored Kurtz's method more closely by going to an established community of readers like a book group or a class of high school students, but instead we deliberately chose to invite a disparate group of undergraduates, graduate students, faculty and support staff. Admittedly, this choice was also informed by the fact that the only funding we had was for Rakib, our research assistant, so keeping our exploration of Story Circles on campus gave us free access to the three rooms we needed.

Another possible limitation for adapting Story Circles for reading studies research is that it is a relatively resource-heavy method in terms of the time, space and (in our adaptation) technology required to organize the different stages, while also demanding all the logistics of ethics applications, recruitment, informed consent, audio recording, and transcription that qualitative interviewing and focus groups involve. It's a method that also

demands more time of the participants. Some models of interviewing are just as in-depth, complex and time-heavy because they involve multiple interviews and group discussions (see, for example, Sweeney 2010), extended discussion and participation in book club meetings (Bessman Taylor 2007) or multiple workshops and digital story co-creation (www.readingonscreen.co.uk). In most interview and focus group work, however, people typically turn up once for a focus group and once, or perhaps twice, for an interview. Our version of Story Circles consisted of four stages (if we include the prompt workshop) with the option for a participant to be involved for all four parts of the process. For our study, two of the researchers (DeNel and Rakib) were present for all four sessions and only one of our readers participated in all three of the formal stages, thereby giving us a total of five hours of their time across two different days in June and October 2018. While it generates a rich set of data, this level of participation poses problems for recruitment and can limit access to Story Circles for those who cannot afford the time.

Despite these limitations, we do believe that adaptations of Story Circles like ours hold potential not only for colleagues in reading studies, but also for scholars working with other types of media audiences. The method would be appropriate for researchers working with librarians, educators or cultural industry workers who have a practical or policy problem they wish to 'solve', for example, or an issue that relates to their interactions with the populations they engage. It is a method that can be especially generative if researchers and their collaborators want to hear stories about people's media use or relationship to a specific medium that are not straightforward and do not simply repeat the tropes and discourses about participation in that medium that may be dominant in a community of use or practice at a particular moment in time. We looked to Story Circles as a means of enabling readers to tell stories about struggles with reading, moments when they had been bored and frustrated by it, times in their lives when reading itself was functionally difficult or when circumstances made it impossible or unavailable to them. But with some alteration of our recruitment materials and tactics, we could also repeat our model with groups of people who do not identify as readers at all, developing our version of Story Circles further by co-producing the story prompts with those participants in a way that encourages them to talk about any medium.

There is flexibility at the opposite end of the Story Circles process, too, that suggests its potential for audience studies. Stage 3 – the discussion of the report – could be undertaken with several groups of people to generate more and perhaps different interpretations of the stories. On the part of researchers – notwithstanding their discipline, or the audiences or medium that are their primary subject of investigation – we would advocate listening for the unusual story, the unexpected critical insight, rather than tuning in to the repetitions or patterns that may occur. Rather than re-containing the participant's stories and interpretations within existing conceptual and interpretive frameworks, we might figure out how to enable these stories and insights to be the knowledge.

As a method that encourages the proliferation of stories and interpretations among participants, versions of the Story Circles method may offer a generative common ground

for researchers from arts and social science backgrounds. It resonates with both the sociological turn in English Studies, and the post-qualitative concerns of some social scientists. The collective aspects of Story Circles have the capacity to destabilize the expert knowledge of the researchers, to produce multiple interpretations of 'the data', and to make process an explicit part of knowledge production. For us, as researchers who began by using traditional modes of working with readers, Story Circles is a provocation to keep experimenting imaginatively, creatively and collaboratively.

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DeNel Rehberg Sedo published *Reading Beyond the Book: The Social Practices of Contemporary Literary Culture* (Routledge, 2013) with her research partner, Danielle Fuller. She is also the editor of, and a multiple contributor to, *Reading Communities from Salons to Cyberspace* (Palgrave/Macmillan, 2011). Her most recent publication is co-authored with Beth Driscoll and is titled 'Faraway, So Close: Seeing the Intimacy in Goodreads Reviews.' DeNel is a professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. Contact: DeNel.RehbergSedo@msvu.ca.

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APPENDIX 1

Story Prompts

- Tell us about a time when you read something that made you feel like a reader or a non-reader.
- Describe a time when you couldn't put down whatever you were reading or a time when you gave up.
- Think about a time when you could choose something to read, and you did. Describe the process of choosing what you chose.
- Imagine you are in deep in the woods in a cabin with no phone etc but a really big bookcase and you browse and pick something to read. Tell us about your experience.
- Describe a time when you were really excited about reading something. Or perhaps you were totally put off by the idea of reading. What happened?
- Imagine you have a free afternoon and choose to read. What happens in your story?
- Tell us about a time you wanted to read and couldn't do it. What happened?
- Tell us a story about the last time you read a book. What happened?
- Describe a time you had time to read something and found it really easy or struggled. What happened?
- Imagine you're with a good friend. Tell them about a time when you had a really good read or tell them about a really bad time reading. What happened?
- Think about your first memory and experience of reading. What happened?

APPENDIX 2

Script for Story Circles Collection

Welcome & Introductions

Researchers:

- Selves
- Reading related research, and how we became interested in exploring a fuller range of experiences around reading
- Story telling circles/PNI
- Details of Informed Consent Document. Ensure participants understand each paragraph.

Participants:

- Introduce themselves to the larger group using the following story prompt:
- 'Tell us a story about the last time you really enjoyed yourself. What happened?'

Explain How Process Works:

- Much like the larger story telling circle we just had, but in small groups 3-5 people).
- Prompts will be given by the researcher-discussion guide, and will focus on reading.
- Exchange stories for 45 minutes and return to the larger group having selected two of the shared stories to tell to everyone.

Break into small groups:

- Discussion guide gives participants a list of three to five questions or prompts (to be determined depending on number of participants). These prompts can be found below, and distributed to each participant.
- Discussion guide asks group members to choose the question or prompt they like best and answer it or tell a story about it.
- Each group member tells her or his story.

Discussion guide can give probes or prompts, such as, 'and then what happened?' Group members can also ask prompting questions.

- Repeat three to five times depending on number of participants with different story prompt selections.

3 stories per person and 10-15 questions per story, and 10-15 questions about each participant.

Goal-directed questions (back to our themes).

Listen for and prompt:

- about identity as reader, non-reader and in between; part of a community (subgroup) or not
- about reading for pleasure not for school or work
- about motivations to read or not
- about emotional responses to reading

Questions based on story elements (characters, situations, themes, values)

Questions based on story fundamentals (form, function, phenomenon)

Questions about participants (not demographic) (personality: preference to be alone, with small groups of friends, or large groups; role: of reading in family, among friends, of teachers growing up and today)

APPENDIX 3

Report on 'Story Circles' prepared by DeNel Rehberg Sedo and Danielle Fuller, 2 October 2018

Why did we choose Story Circles?

This was an experiment. We were exploring what was for us a new research method in order to address the question: 'how do you trace negative affect/emotions of reading?' We chose the 'story circle' method (SC) because we thought that eliciting stories about reading experiences using prompts that explicitly invited participants to tell both positive and negative narratives might meet our objective. The restriction of methods that we have employed in the past in our work with readers (e.g. one-to-one interviewing; focus groups) is that they tend to direct people towards offering up only positive experiences about reading. These are often stories about reading that could be described as celebratory or transformative, e.g. 'reading makes me feel happy and calm'; 'reading has opened up new worlds of knowledge for me.'

The SC method was originally developed by researchers as a way of working with people who belong to the same community (e.g. a village; a women's shelter) in order to tackle a social problem (e.g. dwindling natural resources; how to improve safety for children in a women's shelter). In other words, the original context for SC is community-based participatory research. By adopting and adapting this method for the field of reading studies, then, we are taking it out of its original context and amending its purpose. Nevertheless, one of the aspects of the SC method that attracted us to it was the way in which it not only enables participants to tell their stories more fully than many other methods used in reading studies, but it also makes participants a central part of the interpretive (or meaning-making) process.

What did we do?

There are several stages to the SC method.

Step 1 consisted of creating story prompts that encourage people to tell stories about their reading experiences. The group responsible for doing this was a mix of students and researchers interested in reading and exploring alternative research methods. In *Step 2* we asked people who identify both as readers and non-readers to share their stories in small groups of five or six. Participants were asked to choose two or three prompts that would inform their shared stories. In each group, the researcher and other participants gave probes or prompts, such as, 'and then what happened?' In one group each member told only one story, and in the other, participants told more than one story. The groups then had to choose one story that they wanted to share in the larger group. *Step 3* had everyone return to a big group, and one participant from each small group shared her story. Within the large group, the stories were given titles. Themes, consistencies and inconsistencies were teased out by the entire group. (In this report we have labelled this stage as 'making sense of the stories that they heard'). These themes etc. were written on a whiteboard by one of the researchers. Each participant then added to the board by writing a word or phrase directly on the board or by placing a sticky note underneath a theme.

Examples of stories that were shared in step 3 and examples of the participants making sense of stories that they heard

Here are three stories that were selected by the participants for sharing with the larger group. In other words, these are the second versions of the stories that were initially told within the small groups.

Participant 1's story is a response to the prompt, 'Describe a time when you were really excited about reading something. Or perhaps you were totally put off by the idea of reading. What happened?'

Participant 1: Okay, so here is my story. I was, for years, I was a faithful *Globe & Mail* reader. I had this paper delivered to my house six days a week and I really loved that time of the day when I picked up the paper. And I'd just spread it out with my next cup of coffee. And it was the time for me in the house when the house was quiet. So I just had that time to myself. I have four children, my husband, and a whole bunch of pets and all that. So, it's a busy household. So for me, that time of taking the paper and reading it, and really just getting into it, into everything, into every element of the paper. So I really enjoyed that, every day. And it came to a time when the *Globe & Mail* announced that it was no longer economically feasible to have a print edition of the Atlantic edition

of their newspaper. So they stopped delivering... and they stop delivering, I think it was the time of November/December. And so that the whole process stopped, the paper in the morning, the time to read, the time of... you know, to feel like you are on top of what is going on in the country politically or economically. There was always some interesting news in the paper, I liked the depth in which they looked at those issues and things. So it just stopped! What it was replaced by was an online edition. I could go online, read that. Read that on my computer or tablet. But when I was online, I had to choose to read The Quebec edition, the Ontario edition, the Prairie Edition, the BC edition. There was nothing for Atlantic Canada. So not only I lost that physical connection with that paper, the time and all that stuff that I really enjoyed in the morning but also, there were no connections to where I live, the issues that going on here, the things people would do here. I think the *Globe & Mail* had one reporter that covers Atlantic Canada. Can you imagine being that one person? (Laughter). To me that's impossible, one person reporting on Yarmouth [Nova Scotia] and in Gander, Newfoundland... You know... Having to do it! So, yeah, for me, that was my story: Talking about how much I enjoyed that part of the day. I took inspiration from many things in the newspaper that I kept, the actual physical copy of the newspaper. And in fact, my master's thesis, it was inspired by the 'Lives Lived' section of the... Someone who has passed away. And reading about their life stories that inspired me, so....

DeNel: As part of the story-telling process we now begin with giving your story a title... This is something I have seen in a different situation but that can work in this research setting too. So we are going, it is a part of sense making, we are going to give your story a title. But you can't say anything!

Participant 1: I will not!

DeNel: Okay! We'll observe what you are feeling. So, we name that story now.

Participant 2: I think 'Lives Lived', because... You know, we are busy moms and this is the time for you and you are like all the things are going on but you are not your kids, you are not your husband, you are not... You are still you and this is how it goes for you and giving you a peaceful time and it is yours.

DeNel: I think we have to have some words that represent the loss. 'Lives lived lost'?

Participant 5: Yeah, that's a great one. Like 'Obituary of the Printed Issue.' (Laughter).

DeNel: Ideas, Participant 6?

Participant 6: Ah, nope! But it does make me, I don't know why, but it makes me... it's reminding of this amazing song of Curtis Mayfield, called 'I loved then I lost'.

DeNel: 'I loved then I lost!' 'I read then I lost!'

Participant 6: I liked the title, 'Lives Lived and Lost'. If you need a song to accompany you, soundtrack-like Curtis Mayfield. It's amazing that in that song you have this person who is such a joy in this relationship. It falls away, but the pride is still there. So it will be like the pride of reading is still there, all the things you have cultivated in that time is still there but the relationship is kind of fallen away.

DeNel: What is the name of that song?

Participant 6: 'I Loved then I Lost.' It's unbelievable!

DeNel: Okay, so are we going to go with that, Team?

Team 1: (Positive sound!)

DeNel: 'Lives Lived and Lost.' Do you need a colon? Participant 6, would you like a colon?

Participant 6: I say cool -on!

DeNel: Well, you know!

Participant 6: Not always needed. (Laughter).

DeNel: Do we need one, Participant 7?

Participant 7: Nope!

DeNel: Do you guys... Your team, have you thought about it? Are you okay with us naming that story in that way?

Participant 8: If we are going with a colon, there might be more about... more detail may be, with respect to those...

Participant 4: 'Eulogy for the Atlantic edition!' (Laughter)

Participant 9: Something about 'The Death of the Physical Copy' or 'From Real to Virtual'... I don't know!

Participant 6: I think there is something missing in that story. What happens when you find out that there is only one writer for Atlantic Canada and there is only the digital version, did you continue reading the *Globe & Mail*? If not that's...

Participant 1: I did not maybe tell that part of the story. I cancelled my subscription to *Globe & Mail* and had some words with some unfortunate person in the call center.

Participant 11: That sounds like some sort of loss now, some sort of feeling the gap for the information.

DeNel: I think that's it. So how do you feel about putting that title on?

Participant 1: I think it is spot on, and I am very much fascinated by what she said. And before you titled it, that was in my head. 'Lives Lost and Lived.' And I like the 'Lived' because 'ed' is past tense So I think that's enough. That's everything. And you were right about that, Participant 2, that time when you are a mom of young kids, especially kids at my kid's age. You have these fringe hours, you have these early hours before you start your day and it's late late hours before the kids go to sleep. And that's you get from the day, time out for yourself.

[Informal conversation then leads to story #2]

Story #2 *This story didn't come from a prompt used in the smaller group, but rather, it was shared over an informal lunch with members of that group. The group decided to share this story in plenary.*

Participant 9: Alright! I'll set the scene for you. It is summer 2016, Prince Edward Island, 8 Hurley Street where I lived, I lived with four girls. And *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* had just come out. To put this in context, I had to read *Harry Potter* as a part of children literature class that I have been in 5 years before that. And I hated that little wizard cause I had to read the book from 1-4 and we talked a lot about Habit tree vs Choosing Tree. So the books were released, obviously, each book ended with a cliffhanger, so you needed to get that new book. So I lined up in the midnight with all those kids at the midnight sale and got this book. I headed back to my apartment and that Aerosmith concert was happening at PEI, so I had around 50-60 people planning to come in and crash it at my advice for that era! So half of them already came in Friday night and rest of them will come throughout Saturday. I had this book and I wanted to be part of this festivities but I am not willing to let this book go! So as this party is unfolding around me, and I am sitting down reading the *Order of the Phoenix*. It was going on and I will not let this book down, there is no way I am walking into that Aerosmith Concert without this book being finished so I read it all Friday night, stayed up all night, read it all Saturday. There are photos of me in the background of this party having this book in

my hand and I will not let that one go. And I became a very crazy person with that book and it indicated how for me when I really enjoy a book and it's almost... It's not an enjoyable experience because I am so intended on finishing it and getting to... I guess what ends up in the next cliffhanger until the next book comes out but there was no way I could put this book down while this party is happening. And I did end up finishing it before I went out, somehow. Like you imagine, like I may not have gotten the whole contexts of those last 25-30 pages, I did become that night a very crazy person, probably a miserable host, what do you think? I didn't know!

DeNel: So you guys have to name it!

Participant 5: My first thought was of a parody title of a Harry Potter book. '[Name of participant] and the Hard Clocked Night.' (Laughter).

DeNel: Let the word Aerosmith in it. Let's think of an Aerosmith song.

Participant 6: There is an Aerosmith song named 'Crazy'.

DeNel: 'Crazy Expectations.'

Participant 5: This should be a good time for a colon!

DeNel: Yeah, a colon!

Participant 4: Let's put a colon automatically! 'She Does Not Want to Close her Eyeeessss...'

DeNel: Oh, that's a very good one (laughter).

Participant 4: 'Don't Wanna Miss a Page!'

DeNel: 'Don't Wanna Miss a Page!' 'Obsessive Compulsive Behavior of a Reader!'

Rakib: There should be a term, 'Daniel Radcliff Hanger!'

DeNel: We have to make a decision.

Participant 5: I think that one is really funny: 'Don't Wanna Miss a Page'.

DeNel: 'Don't Wanna Close My Eyes, Don't Wanna Miss a Page?' You guys good with that?

Participant 9: It's scarcely accurate! I think I ended being up for 48 hours by the end of the.

Participant 4: I want to see the parody music video too where Liv Tyler was replaced by a copy of the book. Like Ben Affleck is cuddling up with Harry Potter with little animal crackers and a cover of Harry Potter.

DeNel: So how does the title go then?

Participant 4: 'Don't Wanna Miss a Page'

DeNel: 'Don't Wanna Miss a Page.'

Participant 11: Can I ask a question before we go into that?

DeNel: Yes, for sure!

Participant 11: Because often I am lost in a book like that, reading it, I get completely lost. It takes me a while to adjust in the regular life again, how did you do that? Because you were in such a intense social environment.

Participant 9: I'd rather like... there wasn't any back in (laughter)... Because if you look into these photos, it's funny because you can actually chronologize how I was at my depth! I am buried in the morning, just in my normal clothes, and in the next couple photos, I am in the background where you can see I was in my going out clothes. So I was getting ready and doing things but that book did not leave as I went. Like, I was in my shower and the book was with me, I was in my bedroom, the book was with me. So, I was socializing at the same time but I have a pretty keen ability to tone-out people if I need to. For the sake of the Wizardly world.

Participant 10: Are you using a colon? (Laughter).

DeNel: I don't know! Shall we?

Participant 10: 'Harry: You Don't Wanna Miss a Page!' (Laughter).

DeNel: 'Harry... Don't Wanna Miss a Page?' Ah! Now I get it: 'Harry: Don't Wanna Miss a Page!' Is that good, can we have that? Okay!

[Conversation then continues with another shared story which is not included here.]

Story #3: Participant 3 chose the story prompt, 'Think about your first memory and experience of reading. What happened?'

Participant 3: So I chose the one 'First memory and experience' from my side. I had a great problem reading and getting the alphabet, in my language [Bangla] and English as well. First few years of my school was pretty much okay, there were these alphabets that I see were okay. But in class 1, I got the books and I had to read these because I had exams. So, grandparents were there... My grandpa, mostly... He helped me most, he read the book first, and then he would make me read the book and then he made me read the book among people. My siblings, my parents, my cousins will be there so that I can overcome the situation and I can read them. So it was in my mother tongue, Bangla, but then came the English. I was really bad at that as well. But here was my father, and he helped me with the alphabets, wordings, and how to pronounce them. I am still struggling with these because I really was blank with the wordings. I talked to someone like... 'You know, that thing, that...'... I am really struggling with that. In the reading section, I am doing well now as I always read... I have to read something. In the bus I am reading, in work I am reading, in here as well... I was reading the prompt, again and again, the same line. I have to read something because I got so frustrated in my childhood that I couldn't read that... It's in me that I have to read them, it's something that I have to do. So that was my experience and that memory of struggle.

DeNel: The struggle! Can we ask questions?

Participant 3: Yeah.

DeNel: So, were you medically diagnosed? That sounds like a dyslexic... sort of struggle to me.

Participant 3: Maybe... But I did not get any help from the medical (people).

DeNel: It's good... I said that because my brother had almost that same problem, articulating things.

Participant 3: My country is not that active! They promote the thing, but they will not promote the solution! They will listen to the problem and say just 'Try yourself', 'Don't come to the society and tell that I am dyslexic'. Cause many children will come, and as I said, I have that same thing. But the teacher does not want that.

DeNel: So we have to name it.

Participant 7: Something to do with the grandfather?

Participant 4: 'The Grand Facilitator!'

DeNel: Would you be okay with that? Because it seems to me that, you have this memory of a very prominent figure of your life who forces you, but in a kind way to try on these things that come at a very difficult cost. Am I interpreting it correctly? Do you guys have questions to clarify?

[Conversation then wraps up and participants begin to note themes, consistencies and inconsistencies on whiteboards.]

What happens next?

In our final stage of this project, we are inviting interested people to participate in an online discussion of the stories, collective interpretation of the stories, and of the SC method as we have used it. We will ask participants in this stage to contemplate the following questions:

1. What do you think are the themes in the stories?
2. What consistencies and inconsistencies do you see in these stories?
3. What do you think these stories tell us about the emotional experiences of reading?
4. Do you have any questions or comments about the SC research method?

Note:

¹ We are using ‘affects’ as synonymous with emotions and are pluralising both because we want to avoid simplification of the reading responses that people provide, and because we are not using affect in the theoretical sense that others have. See, for example, the contributors to this text: Gregg, Melissa, and Gregory J. Seigworth. 2010. *The Affect Theory Reader*. Duke University Press.

² 3,546 respondents answered the question in the original questionnaire (USA – 354; UK – 1,996; Canada – 1,196); 61% of the respondents were women; 42% identified as “white”; 85% read in English as their first language (the questionnaire was available in English, French and Spanish); 42% read for between 2 to 5 hours a week and 32% between 6 and 10 hours.