# Reading and company: embodiment and social space in silent reading practices

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## Abstract

Reading, even when silent and individual, is a social phenomenon and has often been studied as such. Complementary to this view, research has begun to explore how reading is embodied beyond simply being 'wired' in the brain. This article brings the social and embodied perspectives together in a very literal sense. Reporting a qualitative study of reading practices across student focus groups from six European countries, it identifies an underexplored factor in reading behaviour and experience. This factor is the sheer physical presence, and concurrent activity, of other people in the environment where one engages in individual silent reading. The primary goal of the study was to explore the role and possible associations of a number of variables (text type, purpose, device) in selecting generic (e.g. indoors vs outdoors) as well as specific (e.g. home vs library) reading environments. Across all six samples included in the study, participants spontaneously attested to varied, and partly surprising, forms of sensitivity to company and social space in their daily efforts to align body with mind for reading. The article reports these emergent trends and discusses their potential implications for research and practice.

**Key words:** reading, learning, embodiment, social space, media, reading environment

## Introduction

Although the capacity to read is a prime achievement of the individual evolving brain (Wolf and Barzillai, 2009), there are many ways in which reading is a social affair. We learn to read from other individuals. The meaning extracted from text is shaped by social convention. The habit of extensive deep reading, whether of fiction or non-fiction, is highly socially valued (Mol and Bus, 2011; Wolf and Barzillai, 2009). In the history of reading, specific titles, genres and reading practices were always considered more socially significant or desirable than others. Individual reading and associated practices (Collinson, 2009) are thus used as a tool for social status formation and display (Bourdieu, 1984), community building (Anderson, 2016; Long, 2003) and more.

Complementary to this traditionally established, social perspective on reading is the recently invigorated view that reading is embodied far beyond being simply 'wired' in the brain. The research framework of embodied cognition posits that written stories (Chapelle Wojciehowski and Gallese, 2011; Kuzmičová, 2014) and mathematical textbooks alike (Lakoff and Núñez, 2000) enlist the reader's storage of prior bodily experiences as an essential link in the comprehension process. By the same token, it has been proposed that the physical environment where one happens to be reading can reinforce text experience via meaning cues (e.g. when a story featuring a particular type of setting is read in congruent settings; Kuzmičová, 2016; Mackey, 2016; Prentice et al., 1997; Vaughn et al., unpublished manuscript), or simply by reinforcing aesthetic pleasure (Burke and Bon, 2017; Kuzmičová, 2016). Digitisation is an additional significant impulse in the ongoing rediscovery of the embodied and physically situated nature of reading. For instance, different physical text supports (print vs digital) reportedly entail different text experiences (Mangen and Kuiken, 2014; Rose, 2011; Rowsell, 2014) and learning outcomes (e.g. Ackerman and Goldsmith, 2011), in addition to different ergonomic and health consequences (e.g. Benedetto et al., 2013).

This article brings the above perspectives, the social and the embodied-cognitive, together in a very literal sense. Reporting a qualitative study of reading practices across student focus groups from six European countries, we wish to point to a relatively underexplored factor in the social and embodied underpinnings of reading behaviour and experience. This factor is the sheer physical presence, and concurrent activity, of other people in the environment where one engages in individual silent reading.

The primary goal of the qualitative study was to explore the role and possible associations of a number of variables in selecting generic (e.g. indoors vs outdoors) as well as specific (e.g. home vs library) physical environments for the activity of reading. Our pre-

defined variables were (a) the purpose of reading (e.g. leisure vs study); (b) the type of text to be read (e.g. fiction vs non-fiction; continuous vs discontinuous); and (c) the reading device (e.g. print book, laptop, e-reader, smartphone). The research rationale was grounded in a primarily embodied-cognitive theoretical framework and intended to expand theoretical insights into environment-sensitivity in reading, e.g. the notion that environment-sensitivity increases with text complexity (Kuzmičová, 2016; see also Mackey, 2010). An additional hypothesis was that portable digital reading devices, due to their distinctive affordances, are used in environments and situations unsuitable for the handling of print volumes, thus expanding the compass of reading (Kuzmičová et al., In Press). No particular predictions were made as to the social dimensions of readers' environment selections and experiences.

However, the sociality of individual silent reading emerged in various instantiations across all six samples included in our study. Focus group participants spontaneously reported sensitivity to their immediate social environment while selecting places and ways to read. Importantly, this sensitivity was *not* defined in the simple negative, i.e. participants did *not* consistently prefer or require solitude and privacy for reading (although some did, especially for study reading), while *few* reported being wholly indifferent with regard to their social surroundings while they read (the exception being, in some participants, episodes of highly immersive fiction reading). In other words, our findings contradict accepted stereotypes of continuous silent reading as an activity unequivocally enhanced by seclusion (Birkerts, 1994; Piper, 2012), and as an activity necessitating mental detachment from the immediate environment (Gerrig, 1998; Spivey and Richardson, 2008).

Such nexus of embodied and social factors in the environments of individual silent reading is only beginning to appear on the research agenda across relevant disciplines. Within phenomenological philosophy, the discipline that studies embodied experience at the most general level, a first principled invitation to explore the "experiential role of social space, as well as its relation to embodiment and affectivity" has only recently been put forward by Krueger and Taylor Aiken (2016). Communication research into mobile devices explores a wide range of behaviours in relation to the sociality of public space (Baron and Hård af Segerstad, 2010), but the activity of reading continuous text is scarcely a central concern in this strand of inquiry. Importantly, reading environments are of increasing interest to book historians (Colclough, 2011), and recent studies in education point to the importance of dedicated space, actual (Loh, 2016) or notional (Chong, 2016), for the acquisition of solid reading habits, as well as to social structures causing inequity of access to such space.

The field of literacy traditionally explores reading in familial and educational settings, which are also inherently social (Compton-Lilly, 2012; Knoester and Plikuhn, 2016; Kucirkova et al., 2015). However, these literacy practices have largely been studied separately from their embodied and material contingencies. In reaction to this, two original arguments for acknowledging the embodiment and physical situatedness of reading were recently published in this journal. One of them, presented by Mackey (2016), reports an auto-bibliographic study of literacy as a process that "winds in and out of the material objects of our ordinary domestic lives", and refers to the embodied and the social in aggregate as a "clutter of people, objects, and emotions" (Mackey, 2016, pp. 166–167). The other is a programmatic statement by Mangen and van der Weel (2016), proposing an integrative research framework wherein qualitative and quantitative approaches will be combined in assessing the impact of technological change on reading experience, embodied, but also social. The study presented here should be understood in light of these proposals.

## Method and procedure

The purpose of our study was exploratory. Thus, we chose a qualitative approach and used the focus group method (Basch, 1987), aiming to collect data concerning both individual choices and motivations but also a common context. The only criterion for participant selection was that they should be frequent readers and declare enjoying reading. Moderators in the different countries used a variety of methods for recruiting participants, including directly approaching students in class and on campus, written announcements asking for volunteers and snowballing. The sessions were conducted in Croatia (HR), Czech Republic (CZ), Portugal (PT), Slovenia (SI), Spain (ES) and Sweden (SE). Participants were undergraduate and graduate students ($N = 36$; 21 females). Their mean age was 21.58 ($SD = 4.36$). Most participants were enrolled in university programs, but some attended professional training below university level. A wide range of subjects was represented, including anthropology, communication, economics, education, library and information science, literature, modern languages, physiotherapy, social work, sociology, technology and theology. This multi-subject and multi-national design alleviated some of the common disadvantages of focus group research in that it introduced a high degree of diversity, thus generating rich data while at the same time adding weight to any trends emerging across the groups. Some variation attributable to cultural differences was observed, e.g. in the use of outdoor or dedicated spaces, but is difficult to generalize upon and falls outside the scope of the present article. There were six participants per session on average.

To maintain consistency across groups, moderators were provided with a methods and purposes briefing

and a protocol for conducting the sessions. The protocol consisted of four open questions.

(a) *Do you enjoy reading? Is reading your hobby?*
(b) *Where (and when) do you read?*
(c) *What do you usually read? How is your reading different depending on whether you read for leisure vs work?*
(d) *How much do you read in print vs digital format?*

The sessions took place in neutral meeting environments in the respective countries, between March and October 2016. Although the study targeted students, there was a high degree of variation as to the participants' urban vs rural background, some of them mentioning frequent or even daily commutes between their place of study and a rural home. The cities and towns where the groups met ranged in population from 66,000 to 1.3 million. Each session lasted approximately 1 hour. The data were audio or video recorded, and transcripts were produced. At the end of each session, participants filled out a brief anonymous questionnaire that included two items on their device preferences and five items on their perceived reading habits relative to peers (adapted from Acheson et al., 2008). Upon transcription, all participants were anonymised and the data were coded using thematic analysis.

## Reading environments, embodied and social

The findings reported below are thematically organised into three sections according to three main types of reading environment: the home, dedicated settings outside the home (e.g. school or library environments) and non-dedicated settings outside the home (all other non-home environments). This division of reading environments yielded vastly distinct sets of reading practices and experiences as reported by the participants. We open each section with a report on the more general main trends for a given environment, before moving on to the more specifically social factors.

### *Reading in the home*

People generally spend more time in their home than anywhere else (Morley, 2000). Unsurprisingly, then, many participants identified the home as their preferred, and most common, reading environment. As for positions within the home, the bed was usually mentioned first, and the couch came second. Reading in the bedroom or living room entailed lying down or reclining, or other postures associated with relaxation and bodily comfort.

> "When I read for pleasure I prefer to lie down because that makes it easier to immerse in another world." SE1

> "I read with my legs crossed on the sofa." ES1

> "I'm not exactly lying down on the bed, I look for a comfortable posture." ES5

In most cases, print was preferred for reading at home, but a few respondents mentioned the superior physical comfort of holding an e-reader or a mobile phone while reading in bed, in comparison to handling thick and heavy print volumes.

> "It can be very nice to lie in bed with an e-reader." SE3

> "To be lying on the bed with a three hundred-page volume over you, that's very heavy." PT5

Participants also referred to leisure reading at home as part of the various domestic rituals such as dining, drinking coffee or going to the toilet, thus linking reading to other home settings. However, when referring specifically to reading for study, they reported different styles of reading with regard to posture as well as environment ("When I am reading for study, I do it at my desk, and I use a pen." PT1; see also next section). Unpleasant outdoor circumstances were repeatedly mentioned as contributing to the pleasure of reading at home, enhancing the safety and cosiness of the home environment and its suitability for 'reading as well-being' (McLaughlin, 2015, p. 133).

> "During winter I like to put my back to the radiator; I take my blanket and sit there, and during summer [I read] on a couch with a lot of pillows." HR2

Despite the fact that the home was often favoured for its proverbial peace and quiet ("I like to read at home, because there I have my own peace," HR4), many participants rather implied that peace and quiet is not necessarily what makes their home a favourite place to read. For some of these participants, the home simply lacks these properties, yet they still enjoy it as a place for reading (see also Rose, 2001).

> "Home is never silent if you have siblings." HR3

> "When I read at home, people are talking, the TV is on." ES4

Others yet reported that the many different affordances of the home on the one hand, and/or its seclusion and privacy on the other, have a counter-productive effect. These participants preferred a more dedicated environment (e.g. a library) for study reading and/or more vivid and eventful public (e.g. outdoors) places for leisure reading.

> "There are too many distractions at home, commitments, responsibility, 'musts'; I rather read in places away from home." SE3

> "My room is reserved for the torment of study, and everything else I read outdoors." HR1

Many of the home-related reading practices described by our participants challenge the assumption that for skilled readers, reading at home is solitary and devoid of social interaction (e.g. Piper, 2012). Providing more than just white noise, family members, partners and flatmates were reported to take part in participants' reading experiences in several different ways. Although shared reading aloud is not the main focus of the present article, remarkably many of our participants engaged in such forms of reading.

> "In our flat, we do shared reading. We have a day scheduled for that. The day that everybody comes back early and we are in the bed, one of us starts to read in the corridor and everyone follows the story. [….] It's like an intimate moment for everyone." ES3

More importantly, silent reading was also experienced as a social practice and sometimes purposefully performed as such. Participants reported enjoying reading together with other members of their household, sharing not only the same space and time for reading, but also exchanging related comments.

> "At home we often read together in the living room, each with their own book, and we sometimes also comment on the books we read – so it can get very dynamic." SI4

Even more generally, however, the home reading experience was spontaneously reported to benefit from the sheer physical presence of others, who disrupt the quiet but endow the reading environment with a sense of belonging.

> "If I read in the room and I sit on a bed […], I will not finish the book, it's too quiet." HR1

> "I don't want to be alone. I like to read most at the kitchen table, where I hear background noises, the TV, or my mom is saying something, but I'm immersed in my book, I just like to be exposed to a varied soundscape." SI3

> "If you read alone you can get lonely, so it's better if there's someone there, either reading or doing something completely different." SI5

This affective impact of the unobtrusive physical presence of others is perhaps the most intriguing finding with respect to the home environment. It is difficult to assess to what extent this finding is contingent on the age of our participants; at the time of the study, only a few had entered the parenting life stage wherein solitude may be valued for its scarcity. Insofar as they may be regarded as members of the young adult population, the participants' relationship to company during reading extends the definition of the Home Literacy Environment as defined in studies into children's reading development (Burgess et al., 2002; Leseman and Jong, 1998), along the lines of Mackey's (2016) proposal that literacy and memories of reading are intertwined with the sheer physicality of their props, including human beings.

## Reading in dedicated settings outside home

Contemporary advances in e-publishing and portable technology seem to promise a future where people will learn through reading anytime, anywhere. While the potential worth of mobile practices for informal learning (Tseloudi and Arnedillo-Sánchez, 2016) and leisure reading (Kuzmičová et al., In Press; see also next section) is relatively evident, institutionalised learning behaviour may not adapt as easily. Exploratory research has shown student samples, internationally, to resist abandoning traditional print formats for study purposes (Baron et al., 2017; Fortunati and Vincent, 2014).

Although reading on laptops was frequently mentioned (see also Burke and Bon, 2017), a clear preference for print over digital format for study purposes was expressed in all six focus groups in our study. Participants' motivations ranged from convenience such as variable in-text annotation and marking ("I print everything; I need to have it physically. To underline, to write on it." ES1), through affective-cognitive concerns such as the visual traces of previous readers in a textbook loan ("I'm sometimes consoled when I see books in a library, stained with tea and coffee." SI4), to cognitive support more generally ("I avoid e-books, because I feel that I don't remember enough." SI2).

However, in addition to studying with largely traditional reading devices, our participants also reported studying in distinct, traditional environments. For them, institutionalised learning was not a mobile enterprise. While some reported a preference for studying at home, many of our participants described the home environment as relatively unsuitable for studying. Instead, they declared a preference for dedicated settings such as reading rooms in libraries or at school.

> "I like reading at home, in the morning, but if I have to read something more demanding, I rather go out to a library and read it there." SI2

> "I really appreciate the constraints of the library. […] It's both [temporal and spatial constraints]. Having the time slot certainly makes a difference but it's mainly about this special environment that is so totally dedicated to reading. […] I have several favourite libraries that I choose from depending on my mood." CZ1

Most of those who make regular use of dedicated reading environments reported using them for study reading specifically, while leisure reading was typically associated with other environments. For some participants, the spatial divide between leisure and study reading was a categorical one.

*"It's not the same space nor the same atmosphere."* ES3

*"Even in the classroom, between classes, I can't imagine taking out a book for the pleasure of reading."* ES2

Postures afforded by typical reading room furnishings (sitting straight up at a desk) were associated with study reading overall. Participants made a point of distinguishing between the alert postures necessitated by studying and the more relaxed postures associated with leisure.

*"For pleasure I read on the sofa, in the armchair, or in bed. When I read for studies I sit at a desk; I have to sit upright."* SE1

*"I can't imagine reading a scholarly article laying down. That's impossible."* ES2

One participant described how the library environment in itself alleviates negative feelings connected with difficult reading tasks (and the typical vertical posture), whereas dealing with the same tasks at home calls for special, embodied, coping strategies.

*"When I'm in the library studying something important, the hard chair and upright position feel good[.] But at the same time when it is a really important thing I have to study, it always makes me a bit nervous too, and curling up with it in bed relaxes me when I'm at home."* CZ4

However, when participants referred to the library as tangibly dedicated to reading, they seemed to have more in mind than proper desks, chairs, lighting, relative silence and an escape from the distraction at home. A library reading room was for them a preferred place to study primarily by virtue of being used for this purpose by others.

*"When I read articles for college, sometimes I also need to go to places where other people are studying."* PT1

*"So for instance at [Library X], it's typically just me and three librarians in the reading room. And this is disturbing. I feel outnumbered. […] So I feel much better at [Library Y] where there's lots of people studying."* CZ3

When reading 'together' with others, participants reported higher motivation for the particular reading task at hand. Some also provided deeper explanations relating to their social identity as students and readers.

*"I like having this sort of approval from the others for studying as such. That it makes sense to do it. So everybody else in that space is studying and I join them."* CZ4

Pre-arranged study in groups was reported to facilitate individual reading through a sense of sharing one's general focus with others within a circumscribed environment. Importantly, one participant brought up the need for the tacit approval of the immediate surroundings not only with regard to the activity of reading as such, but also with regard to one's particular reading materials (see also next section).

*"For instance, walking down the aisle in the main reading room of [Library Y] and seeing all these myriads of medical students with their anatomy textbooks laid out on the desks. That's unsettling. […] I feel like, hope nobody will punish me for studying theology in this place."* CZ1

Reading for study, albeit cognitively taxing, proved never to take place in an experiential or affective vacuum. Even in the case of environments conventionally designed for reading and studying, the feel and impact of any given environment is subject to sensory-motor affordances (Mangen, 2008) as well as social variables, e.g. the physical presence, perceived status and activity of other people in the room. These social variables in turn are not wholly separable from embodiment proper (Krueger and Taylor Aiken, 2016), as one's posture and handling of reading materials in a classroom or crowded library can also be a means of non-conscious social coordination (de Jaegher and di Paolo, 2007) or even serve as an intentional signal of one's attitude or socio-cultural identity ("so then I just held onto the book to flash it" CZ3).

## Reading in non-dedicated settings outside home

Non-dedicated settings outside the home can also be described as public spaces in the widest sense, which are by definition likely to be shared with others. Indeed, participants most often mentioned the social dimension of reading in relation to this type of setting, highlighting its importance for the reading experience. In addition, although other reading supports (print books, e-readers) were frequently mentioned, reading on smartphones emerged as the most distinctive practice.

*"I read the most on my smartphone and it is always online, so I read anywhere. The place and device depend on the content I am reading."* PT4

The impact of mobile phones on public spaces, and changing norms and conventions, has been exhaustively researched (Fortunati, 2002; Ling, 2004). Currently, smartphones and other portable devices are fully integrated in daily routines and are frequently used in social situations (Lee, 2013). Our participants recognise disadvantages, such as the small screen, or their potential for distractions, but they also stress the embodied versatility, mobility and convenience afforded by smartphones.

*"I take the phone [for poetry reading], because it's smaller, mobile and I find it easier … and also I like the way text on the phone has shorter lines, which enables me to go through it faster. [The phone] enables me to read in various positions."* SI3

*"On the mobile phone, during classes, we download a book in .pdf, so at school I read books on the phone, and when I read a [print] book, I prefer to do that during breaks when I have more time and peace."* HR3

The type of reading most typically associated with phones was also specific. More common than extended sessions of deep reading (Wolf and Barzillai, 2009) was the discontinuous reading of bits and snippets whenever one has some time (Hupfeld et al., 2013). Often, participants reported using smartphones for keeping up to date with news or social media, but there were also cases of reading longer texts for studying and, above all, leisure.

*"I read a lot on my phone. […] Some of these are long-form texts. I have a large screen, that's convenient for reading."* CZ2

*"I believe that the key for reading on your smartphone is the momentary. [...] I carry books with me [digital books in the smartphone] and if I have 15 minutes, I read."* PT5

*"In digital, you read everywhere. It doesn't matter if you're on the bus or in class. And you don't even have to spend extra time reading. You just read. It's automatic."* PT1

Although non-dedicated settings outside the home were not described as ideal places for deep reading compared to the home or dedicated settings, reading in public spaces is a very common practice, an effective solution for giving some use to waiting time. But it can also be a social statement, a form of nonverbal and symbolic communication. Lasen (2002) reports how fiddling with the phone is replacing the use of newspapers, magazines and books for communicating that one is unavailable for social interaction, and Fortunati (2002) highlights the display of the mobile phone to express social status.

The symbolic aspect of reading in public spaces is important for readers, as they worry about how their actions will be interpreted, from the mere activity of reading to the content chosen. Our participants highlight that smartphones give them unprecedented privacy, as they don't need to worry about what others will think about them reading or about what they are reading (see also Hupfeld et al., 2013).

*"That's why I prefer reading on my mobile, because not everyone can tell I am reading, they might think I am scrolling on Facebook. [...] There would be a lot of comments in the classroom at school [if the participant's classmates knew she is reading fiction during recess]."* HR2

The social dimension comes into play in different ways. The effect of sharing a space with others on the experience of reading is multifaceted, as it may cause distraction and difficulty in concentrating, or it may provide a comforting sense of company and belonging (see also above).

*"I think I enjoy reading outside in the park or somewhere because of the background sounds, foliage, people, I like that there is something like that, I always read outside. The same thing goes for cafés, I like that there are people around me, that something is happening."* HR1

*"Also I'm really annoyed by being the only one reading in a group of people. I don't like being watched when I read. In a waiting room, for instance. It's much more difficult being the only one reading compared to when I read my book and two other women are reading a magazine. For me it's not only about getting approval, but also about blending in with the crowd."* CZ3

Also, in the company of friends, reading on the phone was reported more acceptable than print reading, due to the tacit assumption that the former will be quick and superficial and thus will not prevent the reader from interacting with others. Unlike single-purpose dedicated settings, non-dedicated public environments are versatile with respect to the bodily actions and social interactions afforded, and smartphones seem to make reading more adaptable than ever before to this versatility (Kuzmičová et al., In Press).

## Conclusion

Compared to other data collection methods such as in-depth interviews, focus groups are difficult to quantify due to the tacit dynamics of turn taking, topic exhaustion, nonverbal patterns and so forth. Individual participants may refrain from commenting if their views are too similar to those already expressed, but some may also shy away from disagreeing. As regards the specifically social dimensions of silent reading, the present article nearly exhausts the explicit mentions in our data set, with the exception of smartphone-related social behaviours, which were discussed extensively. The reading practice associated with perhaps the highest degree of disagreement was reading for study; there was at least one person in each group who reported being overly distracted by sharing study space with others. Finally, it should be noted that some of the non-dedicated settings where our participants reported enjoying reading, e.g. beaches during the summer, also entail rather intensive forms of embodied social sharing that were nonetheless left unaddressed in the discussions.

Overall, it is fair to conclude that the students in our study spontaneously attested to varied, and partly surprising, forms of sensitivity to company and social space in their daily efforts to align body with mind across reading environments. The exploratory data reveals a certain level of conscious curation of literacy practices with respect to the purpose of reading and content being read, an emergent skill of matching the right posture and technological support with the right content and social environment. To use Mackey's words, the experiences captured in our study evade the 'tidy abstractedness' (Mackey, 2016, p. 166) of prevalent approaches to reading, which tend to study the reading mind as if temporarily decoupled from all stimuli in the physical environment (see also Kuzmičová, 2016), other than the text being decoded.

If embodied and social contingencies play such a decisive role in the reading experiences of our participants, who were transitioning or had already transitioned from young adulthood to adulthood, the possible implications for practice and research relative to the more sensitive, less professionalised younger readers are many and should not be ignored. To name just a few, social dynamics and embodied affordances within classrooms may be explored as a factor potentially affecting individuals' reading skills and attitudes to reading. Physical libraries appear to be a vital type of social space for study reading (Fallin, 2016; Loh, 2016) and should be preserved rather than eliminated as digitisation progresses. In light of our findings regarding smartphones as reading devices, further studies may look into readers' potentially changing readiness to read, and modes of reading, in the very close physical proximity of familiar or unfamiliar others.

Finally, heeding Mangen and van der Weel's (2016) call for integrating the social and embodied perspectives on reading through *also* combining research methods that have traditionally been practised in mutual isolation, we see the present exploratory study as a first step towards research designs wherein participants' reading experience and performance will be observed and measured in controlled or semi-controlled experimental environments, and across different bodily and social conditions. Informed by qualitative studies like the one presented here, such designs could provide generalizable evidence for improved practice in the fields of literacy, education, library studies and reading promotion.

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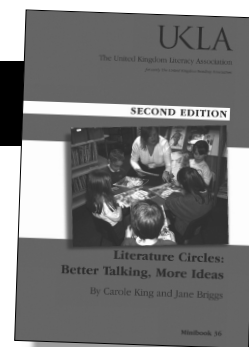
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