

# Literature Circles: Something Old Something New

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## Abstract

Motivating students to read is an important aspect of Reading research. Researchers have determined that activities focusing on reader response, such as literature circles, dialogue journals, and classroom discussions are ways of connecting students' life experiences to texts, increasing understanding of texts, shaping subjectivities, and building communities of learners. Literature circles are a literature-based instructional strategy employed in literacy classrooms today as a way to encourage students to talk about literature. The concept of literature circles, including a description and an explanation of how the approach is most commonly used in classrooms today is presented, followed by the research evidence that delineates the critical benefits students receive from literature circle participation. The article concludes with a brief look into literature circles for the 21st century.

In an effort to understand the nature of classroom contexts that can enhance the development of higher-level thinking among diverse groups of students (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003), a good place to begin is to understand that learning is a function of the activity, the context, and the culture in which it occurs (Lave, 1988). In other words, learning

is situated. Situated learning can be traced to the work of Vygotsky (1978) who posed that knowledge is constructed through the process of interaction in a social context. As learners collaborate on knowledge formation, they become part of a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This premise is supported by Vygotsky (1978) who posited that the use of collaborative groups is an effective method of social interaction because the collective thinking of the group helps each individual group member's thinking. From this perspective, discussion of literature may be viewed as a site for social interaction as group members collaboratively work together to construct meaning while reading and responding to texts. Collaborative literacy encompasses a variety of titles and varying interpretations that focus on developing comprehension and an appreciation for literature. Wood, Rozer, and Martinez (2001) articulate that collaborative literacy is a construct in which students work together to read and discuss literature in a context that promotes acceptance. In fact, research has shown that collaborative book discussions provide the opportunity to develop literacy skills that lead to thoughtful, competent, and critical readers (Sandman & Gruhler, 2007). Further, research has

shown students who once felt marginalized in whole class discussions, learn to discover their voices and become competent participants (Johnson, 2000; Sandman & Gruhler, 2007) in small group literature discussions. In essence, students realize the power of the written word and in turn, they begin to value participation in the democracy of learning (Clarke & Holwadel, 2007).

As a teacher educator who understands the important role that collaborative literacy plays in developing discerning readers of text, I present a discussion on a popular form of collaborative literacy – literature circles. First, I begin with a brief description of literature circles, followed by the typical protocol to implement literature circles in the classroom. Next, I offer a snapshot into how literature circles have been implemented with nonfiction texts. A discussion then follows with a sampling of research that has shown the positive benefits for students when literature circles have been implemented in classroom reading programs and concludes with a brief look at literature circles integrated with Web 2.0 technology.

### **Description of Literature Circles**

Literature circles are a form of collaborative literacy that is widely used in classrooms today. Essentially, literature circles are formed when a group of readers gather together to discuss a book in-depth (Daniels, 2002a). The purpose of this approach is to encourage students to read with a focus and then report on what they have read. These discussions are guided by student responses to what they have read, determining for themselves what is significant in their reading (Burner, 2007), rather than by a list of teacher questions.

Harvey Daniels (1994, 2002a) defines a literature circle as a small, temporary reading group in which each member agrees to assume specific responsibilities during discussion time. The students meet regularly, and the roles or responsibilities change at each session or meeting. When the group finishes reading and discussing the text, group members determine the manner in which to share their comprehension in a whole-class setting. Typically, the reading approach centers on content, rather than a random offering of material. Students choose from the offered reading material, develop their own schedule for reading, and facilitate discussions of the text.

In some versions of literature circles, students are individually assigned roles or tasks that they must prepare for each discussion group. The roles most often utilized with elementary and intermediate students engaged in reading narrative text include the Discussion Director, Word Finder, Literary Illuminator,

Connector, and Illustrator (Daniels, 1994). The purpose of the roles is to give students a focus, as well as a task to help guide and scaffold their own comprehension of the text. The idea is for students to become proficient in literature circle participation so that the classroom teacher can eventually move students away from the strict roles. In fact, Daniels (2002b) warns that strict over-dependence on role sheets should be avoided when he writes, "What was originally designed as a temporary support device to jump-start peer-led discussion groups can actually undermine the activity it was meant to support" (p. 44). To state succinctly, Daniels perceived participation roles as a means and not a means to the end.

In many middle and secondary literacy classrooms, literature circles are implemented as a text-based collaborative learning strategy (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004). Students work in small groups to discuss a novel and other genres of literature, but more importantly, to interact with each other about the text. Texts can be either assigned or self-selected and can be implemented with a wide range of student abilities. Primarily, learning is decentralized in these small groups because the meaning-making process requires students to negotiate, construct meaning, and to assume alternate reading identities in order to arrive at new understandings (Alvermann et al. 1996). During this collaborative group time, the role of the teacher is to be a facilitator and a model for the students, who guides correct student discussion and response techniques (Short, 1999).

### **Non-Fiction Texts**

An effective model to promote small group discussion with nonfiction texts is the collaborative text-based discussion strategy known as TextMaster. TextMaster is a comprehensive program designed to create the collaborative environment of literature circles while reading content in middle and secondary classrooms (Wilfong, 2009). Predominantly implemented in science, social studies, and history content areas, students are assigned the role of Discussion Director, Summarizer, Vocabulary Enricher, and Webmaster to "master the text." The roles were developed to address textbook structures and features (Wilfong, 2009). Students read a portion of a textbook chapter, prepare their roles for discussion, and meet on a continuing basis until the chapter is completed.

Research has shown positive results when TextMaster has been in used in conjunction with nonfiction texts (Miller, Straits, Kucan, Trathen, & Dass, 2007; Stein & Breed, 2004; Straits & Nichols, 2006). Stein and Breed (2004) recommend TextMaster as an effective strategy to teach academic vocabulary in the content areas while Miller et al. (2007) found TextMaster to

be an effective discussion technique to use with biographies. With a specific focus on science content, Straits and Nichols (2006) modified the reading roles to enhance students' comprehension in a science classroom when reading a novel.

### **The Value of Discussions**

Ketch (2005) asserts that literature circles promote conversation; learning is enhanced when students have opportunities to talk about the ideas and to respond to the ideas of others. In a seminal study, literature circles were found to aid comprehension through the practice of retelling (Hanssen, 1990). Students spent time reading, retelling what they had read, and then they demonstrated the ability to answer comprehension questions. This type of exchange provides students with scaffolding for higher-level thinking skills as they hear the comments of their peers, and it enables them to either accept or reject the comments of their peers (Ketch, 2005). Further evidence suggests that small-group discussion supports intellectual engagement with text. Kucan and Beck's (2003) research findings show that in order for students to learn how to think at higher levels about text, they need participation in conversations with others. When given the opportunity to ponder confusing aspects of text and to challenge the text, Kucan and Beck (2003) found that students "gain not only a deeper understanding and appreciation of text ideas, but also a deeper understanding of what it means to think about those ideas" (p. 3). Blum, Lipsett, and Yocum (2002) echo this finding by offering that discussion of text develops students' critical thinking and overall comprehension. Correspondingly, Hill, Johnson, and Noe (1995) contend that student discussion provides the opportunity to "communicate one's ideas in a clear, detailed manner through conversation, writing, or an aesthetic response" (p. 108). The authors further argue that as students engage in discussion, the act of studying, pondering, and thinking carefully leads students to be more thoughtful and evaluative of their own responses.

### **Increased Comprehension and Motivation**

Literature circles have been linked to increased reading comprehension. In a study that examined the effects from small group reading discussion, McIntyre, Kyle, and Moore (2006) concluded from their research that small-group dialogue played a pivotal role in shaping students' co-construction of meaning because the literature circle context provided the problem-solving environment in which the learners could draw from prior experiences and then probe, challenge, and collaboratively work together in the meaning-making process. In addition, Avci and Yüksel (2011) found that literature circles have a positive impact on reading comprehension. The participants

in their study reported that the opportunity to engage in discussions with their peers helped them retain the reading material and increased their comprehension.

Moller (2004) provides support that literature circles play a pivotal role in increasing comprehension and higher-order thinking through an inductive case study that examined one fourth grade student's participation in a heterogeneous literature discussion group who had difficulty with print-based literature. Working closely with the classroom teacher, discussion group dialogue was introduced, appropriate behavior for a literature group was modeled, and role-play activities were conducted to increase bonding among students for the two discussion groups that participated in the study. Recognizing that many at-risk students are excluded from the social aspects of reading, the researcher situated her work to focus on one student in particular who struggled with decoding, comprehension, and group acceptance. A culturally diverse selection of picture books was first introduced to address social issues and then the researcher and classroom teacher moved the two discussion groups to a more advanced level of participation by having the students read and respond to three novels that varied by genre. The results were positive.

The focal student of the study advanced from a literature group outsider to a more capable peer who worked at her actual level of reading development. Moller (2004) concluded that a learning context, rich in engaging literature and supporting of discussion, contributed to the focal student's demonstration of competence. In addition, research findings showed that with explicit teaching strategies, an environment of trust, and the student's personal belief that she had something significant to contribute and learn were positive factors to her increased identity as a valued member of the community of learners and her strengthened abilities to decode, comprehend, and engage in critical discussions within literature circles.

Literature circles have also been linked to positive motivation. Gambrell and Almasi (1996) posit that literature circles encourage students to become more engaged in reading because students are situated in a context that promotes response and challenge to one another's interpretations, share opinions about texts, and question the meaning of texts. Lloyd (2004) concurs by offering that high-quality discussions through student interaction on a reading activity provide the stimulant needed to sustain conversation. Further research shows that interesting and relevant texts motivate students to read (Evans, 2002). The twenty-two fifth-grade participants in the study confirmed that when they were given an opportunity to choose what aspects of the text they wanted to

discuss, they were more engaged and motivated to participate in discussions.

In a study conducted by Cox and Lacey-Parrish (2010), the researchers found that literature circles promote a love for reading. As the participants moved from a teacher-led literature circle format to a student-led format that involved student selection of texts to read, the students were motivated to develop more in-depth questions and made more personal connections in their responses. Similarly, DeVault (2009) found that literature circles help students, "develop a lifelong love of reading" (p. 24). The study centered on a mixed-ability fifth grade class in one school's library as literature circles were implemented as a small group discussion technique.

### **Higher-Order Thinking and Increased Metacognition**

Gambrell and Almasi (1996) ascertain that exchange and exploration of ideas are central elements to enable students to engage in increasingly more complex levels of reading and thinking. This premise is supported by Gove and Long-Wies (2003/2004) who found that literature circle discussions promote critical thinking. The study involved twenty-seven fourth-grade students who were taught how to investigate and find out about explicit and implicit text information, pose open-ended questions, and solve problems while reading and discussing issues of social justice. As the students grappled with prejudice and racism, Gove and Long-Wies (2003/2004) concluded that literature circle discussions provide a forum for students to consider multiple viewpoints.

Diehl (2005) conducted a case study to determine if literature circles are a viable means of promoting thoughtful literacy. As an active participant in the study, the researcher described the scaffolded support given to the five student participants who could easily decode words, but were unable to comprehend. For purposes of the study, Diehl modeled strategies to promote thoughtful reading. She demonstrated how to ask clarifying and thinking-aloud-type questions while she read to illustrate for the students the process of metacognition. In addition, she modeled for the students her own approach to meaning making. The researcher explained that as the five students' comfort levels with language discussion increased, she spoke less because the students became increasingly skilled and more adept at self-regulation during literature circle discussion by applying the strategies and monitoring their own comprehension without teacher prompting.

This study underscores the fact that reading is a highly metacognitive activity where the reader not only thinks

about the material being read but also monitors that thinking. Diehl (2005) articulated that as the students in her study developed more autonomy and more positive feelings about the process of comprehending, the students became more active participants in the literature circles.

### **Identity, Gender Equity, and Cultural Understanding**

One seminal study confirmed that the culture of discourse in the classroom is not only interaction, but also the ideologies that frame the social context and activities. Lewis (2001) conducted a yearlong ethnographic study to determine if literacy practices in the classroom are indicative of the social codes and cultural norms of the larger community. Assuming that classroom communities are subject to frictions that arise during literacy activities, the focus of the study involved five students who were representative of the community at large and who provided contrasting traits by socioeconomic status, gender, and reading ability. Four literacy activities were integral to the classroom reading culture and included: (1) read-aloud to support commonalities among the students, (2) peer-led literature discussion which provided the opportunity for students to establish social roles, (3) teacher-led literature discussions so the researcher could examine the influences of community cultural norms, and (4) independent reading so that students could examine their own beliefs and question the beliefs they held.

Research findings showed that the assumption of power by certain students in peer-led discussions resided with the more socially dominant, white middle-class students. Further data revealed that gender, age, and reading ability were contributing factors to changing subjectivities as some students were observed to reposition and reinvent identities within reading group discussions. For example, many of the boys in her study became non-participants who often resisted their teacher's expectations by symbolically sitting on the margins during whole-class literacy activities. Yet, these same boys repositioned themselves to take up power in the presence of females during literature circle discussions. As a result, Lewis (2001) posits that teachers must give students the opportunity to try differing roles to encourage personal growth in reading and identity development. At the same time, students must be given opportunities to accept, reject, or reinvent social codes and societal norms that affect their lives.

Literature circles have also been found to advance gender equity in the classroom as students work together to examine gender roles in literature and how gender differences are portrayed in texts. During a study of fifth-graders, Clarke (2007) found that

literature circles provide the context to illuminate larger issues of gender and social class. In the fifth grade study, the female participants repositioned themselves into positions of power when they were able to try out the strong female voices in the storylines during circle discussions. In conjunction, Smith (2000) described an all-girls book club that allowed the girls to "negotiate their identities and visit dangerous places" (p. 37) within a teacher-assisted learning environment that emphasized student interaction and discourse. The study consisted of eleven middle school girls who were taught discussion techniques. Smith (2000) concluded the girls engaged in meaningful discussions without the intimidation of their male peers.

Au (2009) advances the idea of culturally relevant instruction by advocating teachers implement culturally responsive literacy discussions. Au (2009) posits that diverse students need opportunities to examine texts through their cultural values and make connections to their world. Not seeing oneself or representations of one's culture in literature has been shown to prompt feelings of marginalization; a point emphasized by Colby and Lyon (2004) who assert, "Students need to be able to make connections between literature and their everyday lives. To state succinctly, children need to receive affirmation of themselves and their culture through literature" (p. 24).

Meacham (2001) provides an interesting discussion based on a yearlong case study in a combined third, fourth-grade classroom of twenty-eight students with eleven different cultures and languages to demonstrate that a culturally diverse learning environment embodies important advantages in higher-order conceptual development with respect to reading comprehension through the practice of literature circles. In this study, the classroom teacher was able to weave the personal, cultural, and educational diversity of her students toward the enhancement of reading comprehension. Essentially, the classroom teacher asked questions that provoked the students to make their own personal connections between sociocultural themes discussed and their own prior knowledge. As a result, students began to function on their own in literature circle discussions by posing questions, countering, and responding in ways that allowed them to form connections across cultural domains. As a result, Meacham (2001) concluded that literature circles offer a culturally diverse context in which intercultural connections can be emphasized and provide the beneficial activity structure for the development of higher-order thought processes.

### **Online Literature Circles**

Premsky (2001) explicates that most students in today's schools have grown up with the Internet such

that they are digital natives. Technology is part of their lives from the use of cell phones to iPods, iPads, Twitter, Instagram, and computers. With the advent of Web 2.0 technology, students are now able to engage in collaborative activities and openly share information (O'Reilly & Battelle, 2009). While literacy has always been a social phenomenon, the new literacies (New London Group, 1996) contain even more of a social component. Much of the new information that is available on the Internet resides in the people who use it, not in isolated texts. Teachers who engage their classes in collaborative projects with Information Communication Technologies (ICT) (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000) are preparing them in important ways for their future. In addition, the new literacies broaden a deeper understanding about the many ways of knowing that exists in different cultural contexts and this factor enables students to develop richer and stronger understandings of the global society (Kamil, 2003). Research has found positive benefits when classroom teachers implement online literature discussions and virtual literature circles. In a study that implemented the use of blogs for students to engage in text discussion, Ellison and Wu (2008) found the students were more enthusiastic to openly share their thoughts and indicated that blogging was more meaningful when addressing written assignments because the blogging improved their comprehension. In addition, Churchill (2009) shares that blogging not only improved comprehension for the participants in the study, but increased motivation. The combination of Message Boards with literature circles have shown increased reading comprehension. In a study involving 125 third and fourth graders in Missouri, Thomas and Hofmeister (2002) randomly selected 25 of their 125 participants and concluded the 25 students made significant reading gains and developed higher levels of critical thinking. Similarly, increased comprehension was found with a group of eight grader classrooms (Moreillon, Hunt, & Ewing, 2009) who used virtual literature circles to discuss a chosen text.

### **A Final Word**

Classrooms are simply corporeal spaces, but through multiple learning activities that involve interaction between teachers and their students, a social group emerges (Collins & Green, 1992). Literature circles are unique social spaces where each reader becomes an active participant in the construction of meaning by drawing on both textual and contextual information, as well as his or her own prior learning knowledge and experiences, with the aid of teacher, peers, and texts (Gambrell & Almasi, 1996). To come full circle, the construction of knowledge mediated in an environment of social interaction is a function of situated learning. (Lave, 1988). Literature circles provide the context for learning to occur, for knowledge to be constructed,

and for students to engage in lively discussions. Literature circles can be both motivating, contagious, and accommodate readers in the 21st century.

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Once you learn to read,  
you will be forever free.

—FREDERICK DOUGLASS

