

Finally Taking the Plunge: Literature Circles

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Ever know something is a good idea, but still not do it? It's like eating well. I know it pays off, but all I think of driving home are my three favorite people: Wendy, Arby, and McDonald. That's what literature circles were for me, the carrot stick for lunch instead of the fast, easier option. But how could I make that carrot more appealing? My initial research convinced me to experiment with literature circles, and I was aware that literature circles are employed effectively at the elementary level, but I was concerned how teenagers would receive the practice. I resolved to sift through the research to discover how to make literature circles valuable at the junior-high level.

Hang-ups

One hang-up for me was the contrived roles that are created for these literature groups: The Illuminator, The Director, The Summarizer, The Connector, and so forth. These roles seem inauthentic; don't readers need the ability to do all of those things, almost simultaneously? I understand why teachers created the roles in the first place (to make order out of chaos), but I was skeptical of teenage buy-in, afraid the roles could easily suck the joy out of reading, and, equally undesirable, give students an excuse to not fully participate by only focusing on one role while disengaging through the rest.

I also questioned the rigor of the practice. If students could truly survive without me, were they being pushed enough? Because students read the literature circle novel largely without the teacher, it means that part of the set-up would be putting students into groups at their independent reading level. I was con-

cerned that working at their independent level wouldn't warrant the kind of growth that could come as we read books together at their instructional level.

Additional concerns included the classroom management implications of grouping several teenagers together and expecting them to frequently work independently, and how to encourage the growth of both the confident, talkative students and the more reserved. I hoped these challenges could be overcome by procedures we had already built throughout the school year. For example, we had already practiced the procedure of reading in small groups several times throughout the year before I implemented literature circles.

Benefits

Proponents of literature circles believe the benefits outweigh the cost. In an article on how to fix some of the most common problems with literature circles, Clarke and Holwadel (2007) suggested "book groups capture the belief that reading is transactional, and that meaning is not just found in the text or a reader's head but also in the transaction between the text and the reader" (p. 21). I can own to that; some of my most important enlightenments about the human condition, about the need for compassion, and even about who I want to be, have come from my transaction with great literature. But too often, my students simply see *my* transaction (via whole group instruction and a class novel) and are left too infrequently to create these experiences for themselves.

Using literature circles takes our students a step further toward their own meaningful transactions with the text. While beginning

the year with a class novel makes sense (allowing the teacher to demonstrate literary discourse), the model of gradual release of responsibility does imply that at some point the teacher must let the students lead their own literary discussions. I failed to do this by not removing myself from the center ring. This failing hinders my students' ability to take ownership for their own learning (which has been a frustration for me).

One teacher related similarly: "Two goals in my classroom are for every student to feel ownership and to take responsibility for his or her learning" (Stien & Beed, 2004, p. 510). To accomplish this goal, the teacher used literature circles and "found [them] to be one of the best practices to help students meet these goals" (p. 510). One small example of students taking ownership for their learning was having each group decide the number of pages they must read per day in order to finish the book by the deadline. This simple task, which would take the teacher significant time to calculate, allowed students to feel ownership for what they need to read each day since they decided on the amount themselves. Another more significant responsibility shift was that in literature circles, the students created the meat of each discussion, including formulating thoughtful questions to be posed to the group. This responsibility shift put students in a position to have their own "Aha" moments.

Issues I Considered

The first obstacle in my way was the most obvious: How do I begin? I partnered with a colleague to purchase several high-interest novels revolving around a similar topic, dystopias (currently a popular sub-genre). While each group read something different, all were able to contribute to our class-wide discussion in a positive and unique way. (For a list of the books we chose, see sidebar.) I began this unit by teaching *The Giver* as a class novel to intro-

duce topics such as "What role should government have in a person's life?"; "What elements would make up a perfect society?"; and "What would you be willing to give up to protect your most important values?" These questions were then elaborated on in their literature circles.

My goal was to create authentic book groups, the type adult readers participate in. We love these groups! There's good food, good discussion, sometimes tears, and frequently laughter. So for my students' book groups, I focused on creating daily opportunities for students to develop the skills needed to hold meaningful discussion, instead of assigning arbitrary roles. These tasks helped students focus their reading, learn how to ask thoughtful questions including how this new novel added to their understanding of the topics previously discussed with *The Giver*, and how to pull from the text and life experience to find thought-provoking, thematic discussion points.

Dystopian Titles We Used

Gathering Blue by Lois Lowry
House of the Scorpions by Nancy Farmer
Gregor the Overlander (Book 1) by Suzanne Collins
Among the Hidden by Margaret Peterson Haddix
Uglies by Scott Westerfeld
The City of Ember by Jeanne DuPrau

Central to this practice was student choice. Though my students didn't have total control over what we read (I purchased the sets of novels), they had the opportunity to

choose among six great options and it is no surprise that "the books and stories that children find 'most interesting' are those they have selected for their own reason and purposes" (as cited in Burns, 1998, p.125). Anecdotally, my favorite reading in college was the reading I snuck in between classes, assignments, and projects. Student choice was key because "the deepest spirit of literature circles come from independent reading and for reading to become a lifelong habit and a deeply owned skill, it has to be voluntary" (Clark &

Holwadel, 2007, p. 26). Literature circles found a happy medium between, on one end, the teacher deciding what the student will read and, on the other end, the student reading in isolation from the class. It afforded students significant choice and they, in turn, treated the reading as more of a pleasure than as an assignment.

The next decision made was how to introduce students to the book choices. I set up a book pass, allowing students a few minutes to peruse each choice on his/her own and then select an order a preference. One seasoned practitioner recommended that students should be asked to make their preference list quickly (and privately) so that it is a reflection of their personal interest, not a reflection of what will put them in a group with their friends (Burns, 1998). I found allowing the students to read each book and rank them created a natural distribution across all six choices. I was able to put all students into a top three choice (most into one of their top two choices). This also allowed me to affect the decision of which book group lower-skilled readers would be placed.

Research also suggested book talks as an effective way to introduce the students to their book choices. Although some research suggests a teacher need not feel obligated to have read all the options, I personally cannot convince my students of the merit of something I've not experienced. Similarly, the teacher could ask students who have previously read and enjoyed the books to recommend them to the class and give a brief teaser. To a teenage audience, student recommendations frequently go further than my own.

How to put students into groups was also a primary concern. From my research, I saw that teachers recommended four to five students per group in order to maximize efficient use of time (Stien & Beed, 2004). I was surprised to find that teachers also recommended heterogeneous grouping of students. I was ex-

pecting that leveled groups would help the teacher differentiate instruction, but the bulk of my research suggested students benefit more from mixed-ability groups in this context. For example, Burns (1998) suggested that "Both good readers and poor readers preferred working in mixed-ability groups over either whole-class instruction or individual work. The students perceived that in mixed-ability groups, students helped one another more, learned more, and enjoyed being in the group more" (p. 125). When the students enjoy it and still learn, my job is more enjoyable, too.

Reading in a heterogeneous group also had significant value for struggling readers. Students (including struggling readers) "learned the language needed to talk about texts and gained confidence in communicating their ideas to others. They began to relate one text to another and recognize that stories are constructions by authors" (Simpson, 1994, p. 294). When students learn from each other how to interact with the texts, their confidence grows, causing a chain reaction that leads to the struggling reader continuing to read and even learning to enjoy it.

There was also a great benefit for socially reserved students who normally would not participate in whole group discussions. "Small groups are also less threatening for many students who may volunteer opinions they would be reluctant to voice in front of a class" (Simpson, 1994, p. 290). After three years of teaching, I saw this as an obviously valuable effect. Frequently I wonder how to engage these "non-responders" in a way that is not threatening to them; I believe literature circles provided that outlet.

Avid readers also enjoyed the opportunity to discuss what they were reading with others. One student remarked, "It's a lot easier discussing books in a small group than in a whole class...and it helps you to comment on the books that you are reading, whereas if you were reading a book for personal use, unless

someone else you know is reading it or has read it, you can't comment on it" (Simpson, 1994, p. 290).

Nuts and Bolts

Once students selected a book and gathered into groups, the real work began. Similar to an adult book group, I wanted students to spend the majority of the time simply discussing what they were reading, both asking and responding to questions posed in the group. Much of the research suggested using the roles I am leery of to help students begin discussion. The roles are used to provide students with a framework and during the course of the unit, students would perform many of the roles. I still wasn't sold on the concept, however, and incorporated other suggestions, as follows.

One way my students prepared to discuss their assigned reading was to use sticky notes, tabbing important selections and recording questions, thoughts, and problems while they read. Once students gathered with their group, students shared what they have recorded. Stien and Beed's (2004) students were surveyed and found to prefer this method to role sheets. These researchers also noted that "the conversations with tabbing included even more natural book conversations" than previous conversations using roles had (p. 516).

Another method I employed was a parlor game. I provided open-ended questions in a jar that the groups used to facilitate discussion. This provided question variety and allowed me as the teacher to model and discuss several important elements of an effective literature circle conversation. As I modeled, students saw and then practiced "what conversations should and shouldn't look like" (Stien & Beed, 2004, p. 511) including the "difference between reporting information and building upon the comments of others" (p. 513).

Additional during-reading activities included:

- Mapping characters' development throughout the book on a graphic organizer and then discussing who changed for the better or worse, whose change was the most important, how the change impacted students understanding of utopias, and so forth.
- Recording text connections (world, self, other texts) they made as they read and discussing with their book groups
- Formulating "teacher-type" questions to be posed during discussion
- Identifying quotes from the novel which illustrated the theme(s) and using these to write a literary analysis of the novel

I found it especially helpful to use strategies and activities that we had used in previous units so students were not cumbered by the strategy itself and could focus on the learning itself.

Reflection

Looking back, this first attempt at literature circles was a positive one. First, my students' actions demonstrated they felt responsible to add to the quality of discussion in their groups. Another important success is that each student enjoyed the book they read! That is certainly worth celebrating.

By far, the most difficult part for my students was creating "teacher-type" questions so my resolve this year is to give them more practice throughout the school year before we do these literature circles again. I've been directed by a colleague to look into a practice called Reciprocal Teaching, which helps students learn to ask more meaningful questions. The type of higher-order thinking required in being part of a book club is not easy to teach, but I am committed to trying.

This new school year, I move forward believing that my students can benefit from this process in a different way than any other op-

portunity I provide them during the school year, and they are, after all, the reason I do any of it.

References

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