



LITERATURE CIRCLES

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WHAT ARE LITERATURE CIRCLES

In **Literature Circles**, small groups of students gather together to discuss a piece of literature in depth. The discussion is guided by students' response to what they have read.



- **Literature Circles** provide a way for students to engage in critical thinking as they read and respond to books.
- Students add to their understanding through collaboration.
- **Literature Circles** guide students to deeper understanding through structured discussion and written and artistic response. (Hill, Noe & Johnson)



LITERATURE CIRCLES SHOULD BE A PART OF A BALANCED READING PROGRAM

- Between teacher-guided and self-directed
- Between wide (extensive) and close reading (intensive)
- Between different social groups (individual/small groups/ whole group)



Literature Circles Are . . .

- Reader response centered
- Part of a balanced literacy program
- Groups formed by book choice
- Structured for student independence, responsibility, and ownership
- Guided primarily by student insights and questions
- Flexible and fluid; never look the same twice

Literature Circles Are Not

- Teacher and text centered
- The entire reading curriculum
- Teacher-assigned groups formed solely by ability
- Unstructured, uncontrolled "talk time" without accountability
- Guided primarily by teacher- or curriculum-based questions
- Tied to a prescriptive "recipe"



11 KEY INGREDIENTS OF LITERATURE CIRCLES

- Students choose reading material
- Temporary groups formed on book choice
- Different groups read different books
- Meet on regular schedule
- Written notes guide reading and discussion
- Discussion topics come from students
- Meetings to be open, natural conversations; some digression
- Teacher is facilitator
- Evaluation by teacher observation, student self-assessment
- When book done, share with classmates



FORMING LITERATURE CIRCLES

- Groups from 4-5 students
- Book choices 6-7 different titles (ask for 3 top choices)
- Need 2-3 weeks for a book
- Meet every 2-3 days or 2-3 hours a week
- Start with short selections
- Students may also read same work
- Choose books by secret ballot
- Alternate with other curriculum units



LITERATURE CIRCLE

TRAINING STEPS



- Explain how activity works and why
- Practice with students
- Debrief—ask students to notice effective procedures
- Refine—provide ongoing training through mini-lessons and coaching



TYPICAL LITERATURE CIRCLE DAY



- 5 minutes: mini-lesson
- 20-30 minutes: group meetings and/or reading time
- 5-10 minutes: sharing/debriefing
- Mini-lessons before and sharing after literature circles are the most important times!



MINI LESSONS

USE TO ENCOURAGE DIFFERENT KINDS OF THINKING/ANALYSIS

- How do authors hook us on the first page?
- What are some ways that authors reveal character?
- What are the main ingredients of a mystery?
- What does “believable” dialogue sound like?
- How does an author’s time period affect his/her work?
- What makes a good book title?
- How much detail is too much?



LITERATURE CIRCLE MEETING GUIDELINES

- Circle up
 - Get started in one minute
 - Read or follow along
 - Cooperate with your group
 - Discuss quietly and politely



(Candler)



WHAT TO PUT IN A RESPONSE LOG?



- Your connections
- Opinions
- Criticism
- Questions for the author
- Questions about the story
- A drawing
- Something it reminds you of



ROLE LOGS

Basic Roles

- Connector (connect what they read to their own lives)
- Questioner (wondering and analyzing)
- Literary Luminary/ Passage Master (reread special, important sections of the text)
- Illustrator (visualizing, invites graphic response)

Optional Roles

- Summarizer (brief summary of day's reading)
- Researcher/Investigator (dig up background information)
- Vocabulary enricher/word wizard/wordsmith
- Travel Tracer/Scene Setter (where is the action happening)



SUBSTITUTE FILM PRODUCTION ROLES FOR TRADITIONAL LITERATURE CIRCLE ROLES.

- Casting Director
- Critic
- Dialogue Director
- Director
- Manager
- Production Designer
- Soundtrack Designer
- Storyboard Artist
- Analyst



ROLES AS LITERARY CRITICS

(DEFINITIONS ADAPTED FROM *BRIDGING ENGLISH* BY MILNER & MILNER)

- **Historical/Biographical Critic**

Examine the texts according to how history—of the author or of the times—shapes the work.

- **Formalist/New Criticism Critic**

Analyze not *what* the text means but *how* it means: explicate character development, plot structures, setting, language, images, tension, irony, ambiguity, paradox, and tone.

- **Archetypal Critic**

Search for recurrent universal images (water, fire, circle, garden, desert, numbers), motifs (creation, initiation [separation, transformation, return]), hero's journey, quest, transformation [physical, spiritual, social], immortality), patterns, and literary genre (spring: comedy, summer: romance, fall: tragedy, winter: irony).

- **Feminist Critic**

View the women characters and their roles, employing tools from other disciplines: history, psychology, linguistics, sociology, anthropology, and history.



- **Marxist Critic**

Examine the social, cultural, and political milieu of the text, especially the explicit and implicit assumptions of the author and the times and the issues of social and economic justice.

- **Psychological Critic**

Explore the world of the unconscious: the levels of consciousness (conscious, preconscious, unconscious); the theoretical structure of the psyche (id, ego, superego); the influence of defense mechanisms: repression, reaction formation, projection, rationalization, displacement, regression); syndromes such as the Oedipus and Electra complexes; the natures and interpretation of dreams.

- **New Historicist Critic**

Offer new perspectives on readings of traditional texts of the past, enlarging the range to include minority, personal, and popular writings and noting how the reader's vision is determined by the historical context of the writers and the readers, ourselves.

- **Reader Response Critic**

Look at the role that the reader's individual background and personality play in interpreting the text, how the reader creates meaning and what influences the reading.



CONSTRUCTIVE ASSESSMENT

- Should focus on whole, major outcomes.
- Should use a wide variety of assessment tools to create a deep picture of the whole activity.
- Should include self-assessment
- Could use a “daily stamp.” If it isn’t done completely, no stamp.
- Could have students prepare own rubrics and points



LITERATURE CIRCLE PROBLEMS

- Teachers need patience and should not to expect too much too soon.
- Teachers need to be comfortable not being the center of attention and having complete control; they must facilitate student-run discussion.
- Mechanical or flagging groups sometimes result from too structured role sheets
- Over-assessment chills groups.
- Noise is only a problem if kids can't hear each other, if it bothers the teacher, or if other faculty complain. Use “twelve-inch voices.”



BENEFITS OF LITERATURE CIRCLES



- Responsibility for discussion shared equally
- Good for differentiating students—if they select books that are too hard, someone can help them.
- Gives shy kids safe arena.
- You can have good conversations about a “bad” book—WHY don’t they like it?



LITERATURE CIRCLES ENCOURAGE LIFELONG READING



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