

FOR-PD's Reading Strategy of the Month



(Developed by Glass, C. & Zygouris-Coe, V., 2005)

Rationale:

The use of cooperative learning is an effective instructional strategy for reading comprehension (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001). Students working in small learning groups encourage each other to ask questions, explain and justify opinions, articulate reasoning, and elaborate and reflect upon knowledge. Through the use of cooperative learning, students learn more about themselves, about the world, and about valuable subject matter (Daniels & Bizar, 2005).

Every day, in classrooms across the country, students meet in small groups called literature circles to work on reading. Literature circles are small, student-led discussion groups whose members have chosen to read the same text (Daniels, 2002). Through the use of literature circles, readers are given opportunities to become literate. The discussions that evolve in these groups support readers in becoming critical thinkers. Students are empowered to create their own destinations in the reading process (Stien & Beed, 2004).

Daniels (2002) and Daniels and Bizar (2005) have identified eleven key elements of literature circles:

1. Students choose their own reading materials.
2. Small, temporary groups are formed based on the reading materials the students have chosen.
3. Different groups read different text.
4. Groups meet on a regular, predictable schedule.
5. Students use written or drawn notes to guide their reading and instruction.
6. Discussion topics come from the students.
7. Group meetings aim to be open, natural conversations, so personal connections and open-ended questions are welcomed.
8. The teacher serves as a facilitator, not a group member or instructor.
9. Evaluation is by teacher observation and student self-evaluation.
10. A spirit of playfulness and fun pervades the room.
11. New groups form around new reading choices.

What research is there to support literature circles?

The body of research related to literature circles is growing. There are all sorts of evidence, support, and testimonials that support its effectiveness. Daniels (2002) conducted research with Chicago teachers that linked literature circles to improved student achievement. Daniels and his colleagues helped teachers implement literature circles as part of a reading-writing workshop. Training involved summer institutes and school-year support delivered through peer consultants, veteran teachers who had used the strategy in their own classrooms. Results from a citywide assessment showed that schools using literature circles out performed those who did not in both reading and writing. In third grade, the literature circle schools made gains of 13 percent in reading and 25 percent in writing. In sixth grade, the literature circle schools made gains of 9 percent in reading and 8 percent in writing. In eighth grade, the literature circles schools made gains of 10 percent in reading and 27 percent in writing. The teachers in these schools were convinced that the literature circles were working to help students become readers.

Other researchers have found similar results. Klinger, Vaughn, and Schumm (Daniels, 2002) found that students in peer-led groups made greater gains than control groups in reading comprehension. There were equal gains in content knowledge after a reading and discussion of social studies material in peer-led groups. The effect was substantiated through standardized measures of reading and through a social studies unit test. Klinger et al also found that students' small-group talk was 65 percent academic and content-related, 25 percent procedural, 8 percent feedback, and only 2 percent off-task.

Martinez-Roldan and Lopez-Robertson (Daniels, 2002) looked at the effect of literature circles in bilingual, first grade classrooms. They found that young children, no matter what their linguistic background, were able to hold rich discussions if they had opportunities to engage with books. They found that the Spanish-dominant students were more eager and ready to make personal connections with the stories than their English counterparts. The Hispanic students manifested their connections through a telling of extended stories, a style in which English students rarely utilized.

Dana Grisham (Daniels, 2002) has recorded much of the research related to literature circles. Results from the research collected include benefits to inner city students, incarcerated adolescents, resistant learners, children living in poverty, and second language learners. Various versions of literature circles have been found to increase student enjoyment and engagement in reading; increase opportunities for discourse; increase multicultural awareness; promote other perspectives on social issues; provide social outlets for students; and promote gender equality.

Classroom Climate and Literature Circles

Literature circles incorporate features that can change the classroom climate to be more cooperative, responsible, and pleasurable while encouraging the growth of reading (Burns, 1998). These features include choice, groups of mixed ability, student management of small groups, and time to read during the school day. The power of choice is one of the most consistent finds in reading motivation. When using literature circles, students are able to make their own decisions about the material they read, when it will be read, and what will be discussed in their groups. Allowing students to make these choices gives them a feeling of control over a part of their learning. For reluctant readers, these choices can be very motivating. The social interaction that takes place in the literature circles is critical to its success. Listening to other modes of thinking, being able to verbalize content, and hearing other perspectives contribute to deepening comprehension (Burns, 1998). Many students enjoy small group reading because it allows for more opportunity to participate. Working with smaller numbers of people, students may begin to take the risk of sharing their thoughts and ideas. Literature circles provide an opportunity for students to read during the school day. Not only does it allow students to read during school, but it gives the students opportunities to read across the curriculum as well.

Will literature circles work in content-area classrooms?

The answer is yes, however, the typical text of many content-area classrooms, the textbook, will not work in literature circles. Textbooks filled with facts and should be used as reference books. They are best used to look up information when needed. Non-fiction text that is suitable for use with literature circles have some kind of narrative structure, some conflict or danger, some opposition of values, some kind of ethical or political dimension, some debate or dispute, and some ideas that can be disagreed on. Nonfiction text suitable for literature circles include: biographies, how to books, adventure tales, eyewitness books, magazines, newspapers, and historical novels, although they are not considered nonfiction but they have some basis in history.

How to Use the Strategy:

Student Roles:

In each group, the students assume various roles. Teachers must explain and model each of these roles before students are asked to assume responsibility. The teacher should then support students in these roles until they can do each independently. The roles are important because they give students a unique way to think about the text using various cognitive abilities and perspectives (Stein & Beed, 2004).

Connector - Good readers draw on prior knowledge and experience to help them understand what they are reading and are thus able to use that knowledge to make connections. By teaching students how to connect to text they are able to better understand what they are reading (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000). In the role of **connector**, a student will find connections between the text, other texts that have been read, the world, and him/herself. The task is to understand the text by relating it to or bringing connections to the discussion.

Questioner - Questioning is effective for improving comprehension because it gives the students a purpose for reading, focuses attention on what must be learned, helps develop active thinking while reading, helps monitor comprehension, helps review content, and relates what is learned to what is already known (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001). The **questioner's** responsibility is to ask questions about the text that the group is reading. The questions should be open-ended and should generate discussion.

Passage Master - It is the passage master's job to decide which passage is worth discussing. This job involves identifying passages to be read and shared with the group. It is his/her responsibility to plan for how the passages will be shared with the group.

Illustrator - The illustrator is the graphic artist of the group. It is his/her responsibility to draw a representation of the reading.

Other roles: The **critical thinker** develops questions for critical thinking based on Blooms Taxonomy. The **technologist** designs a technology-based activity that connects the book with reading and writing. The **investigator** locates background information on the topic that will be useful to gain a deeper understanding of the topic. The **word wizard** specializes in locating words that are new, different, strange, funny, interesting, important, or hard. The **summarizer** is responsible for summarizing the reading.

Getting Started

Before getting started with literature circles, teachers should do some reflective thinking about how to structure the literature circles in their classrooms. Important questions to answer include:

- What books will be used? And what is their approximate level?
- How will you get the books?
- How will students choose their book?
- Will your students have roles?
- How often will groups meet?
- How will students prepare for meetings? Will they complete role sheets or an assignment packet?
- What will you do if a student is unprepared for their meeting?
- How will you introduce the idea of literature circles to your students?
- How will you access your groups?

By thinking through these types of questions the teacher will be better prepared to implement literature circles in their classroom.

Once you have thought through the logistics of literature circles in your classroom, it time to begin working with your students. It will be important that you include a great deal of modeling and discussion when teaching students about literature circles. Some tips that other teachers have suggested include:

- Start small! Use short articles to model with students the processes of literature circles.
- Time is critical. You might have students prepare for their roles at home.
- Make sure you model the roles for students so that they have a clear understanding of their responsibility.
- Skills students will need should be introduced prior to using literature circles and can be reinforced through the use of mini lessons.
- Give students choice.

Prior to implementing literature circles, you will want to introduce the following skills, as students will be expected to use them in their literature circles:

- Summarizing
- Asking good questions
- Answering questions
- Choosing vocabulary words and deciphering meaning
- Using graphic organizers
- Using a response journal or taking notes from the reading
- Determining whether information is relevant or irrelevant
- Using social skills in group situations
- Using effective communication skills

Mini lessons provide excellent opportunities to reinforce these skills.

Introducing Literature Circles

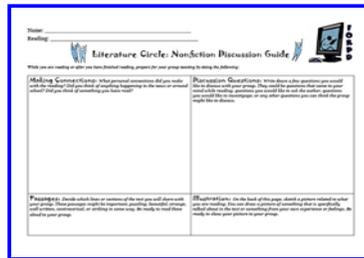
Use the following steps when introducing literature circles to students (Daniels, 2002).

1. Decide on an article that will be engaging to students. The article should be no more than a couple of pages long. Have students read the article for homework.
2. The next day, explain what literature circles are and why you as a teacher value them. You might talk about choice, motivation, or social interaction.
3. Pass out a master sheet that explains the roles you have selected for your literature circles. Review each role with your students.
4. Divide the class in half. One half of the class is told to go over the article for 10 minutes. They are instructed to pick two passages that they find meaningful and jot their reason(s) for choosing that passage. You should model for students by choosing a passage, reading it, and explaining why you chose it.
5. The other half of the class will jot down connections they can make to the article. Again, you should model by making a connection and explaining the connection.
6. After ten minutes, ask for students to volunteer to share their passage or connection. Invite other students to respond to the passages or connections that are made.
7. During sharing, the teacher takes on the role of the facilitator – inviting everyone to participate and keeping track of time.
8. Repeat the same procedures with each of the roles you have chosen for your literature circles.

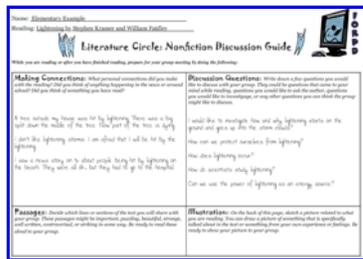
- Continue until you are sure students understand each of the roles.

Basic Literature Circle Model

- Choose 3-4 pieces of text and obtain multiple copies of them.
- Present the pieces of text to your students and allow them to write their preferences in order on an index card. Use that information and your knowledge of their reading skills to create reading groups.
- Make a response journal for each student or have them bring in a notebook for this purpose.
- Students read alone, with a partner, or in small groups. Instead of you assigning pages to read, try letting the groups set their own daily reading.
- As students read, they mark discussion points in their books with sticky notes or write in response journals, and they bring their notes and questions to the meeting with them.
- On the literature circle meeting day, meet with one group at a time, or move from group to group as they meet. Observe the discussions and interactions going on in the group.
- When groups are done with the text, they should evaluate their experience. Collect journals, role sheets, etc.



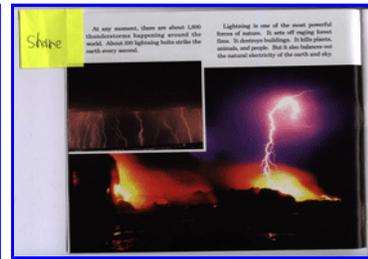
(Click above to download a Nonfiction Discussion Guide to use with Literature Circles.)



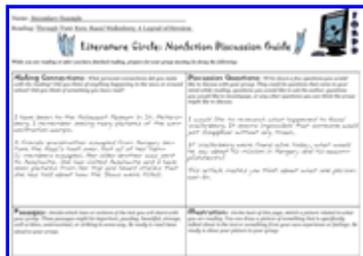
(Click above to download an elementary example of the Nonfiction Discussion Guide.)



(Click above to view the illustration created by an elementary student reading Lightening.)



(This student used sticky notes to identify passages to share with his group.)



(Click above to download a secondary example of the Nonfiction Discussion Guide.)



(The secondary students reading a short article on a Holocaust hero used a double entry journal to identify passages and write their reactions. Click on the image above to view a copy of the double entry journal.)

Assessment:

When teachers devote classroom time to any activity we want to know if students learned from it. Literature circles are no different. Teachers are especially concerned that students are held accountable for reading carefully, preparing thoughtful notes, and joining fully in a group conversation. So the question is, how can we assess literature circles?

First, you can give students points being prepared with reading materials and reading notes. This is an all or nothing evaluation. You can walk past students, grade over their shoulders, points or no points. If you are concerned about kids faking it, you can collect them at random to review what students are writing. At the end of a literature circle cycle, students can

place all of their notes in a folder as a written record of their reading and thinking. If sticky notes have been used students can place page numbers on them and stick them to a piece of paper that can be added to the folder.

Once classroom groups are up and running, you can visit groups for five or ten minutes to observe how students are thinking and talking. Below is an observation form adapted from Harvey Daniel's (2002).

(example observation sheet)

In each visit, teachers can easily observe important comments from each member, discover who is prepared, determine the types of thinking students are doing, and note the social skills they demonstrate.

Students can use self-assessments as a way to reflect on their involvement with literature groups. Teachers can design forms similar to the one presented above for students to use. Some other examples of group assessment include having a member of the group sit out of the conversation circle to track the group's reading strategies or social skills on a simple form. The student would then discuss his/her observations with the rest of the group. Another idea is to videotape groups and in a subsequent meeting review the tape, discuss strengths and weaknesses, and make plans for improvement (Daniels, 2003).

Using a performance assessment rubric is a great way to assess literature circles. Daniels (2003) suggests following these steps to create a rubric with your students.

1. After kids have had the experience of participating in literature circles, ask the kids: What are the specific traits of effective literature circle members? Have students brainstorm a list of items like: "Do the reading," "Take turns," and "Asks questions." Students may brainstorm many traits that members should demonstrate.
2. The next step is to narrow down to the most important traits. Put students into small groups. Explain to students that we don't want a score guide with 15 to 20 criteria, it would be way too complicated to use. So the groups will be deciding which 5 or 6 elements are most important, and they should decide how to word them.
3. Once groups have their list of key skills or traits, they will have to decide how many points will be assigned to each. Students will have to decide if some traits are more important than others. Once groups have assigned points, direct groups to place their rubric on an overhead so that it can be shared with the whole class.
4. The final step is to have a consensus-building meeting where the final decision on the rubric is made. The class should discuss or debate which characteristics should be included in the class rubric and how many points each will be worth.

If you use all of the above ideas for assessment, your students will end up with a portfolio that includes: multiple daily check-ins; copies of all reading notes; teacher observation logs; peer observation reports; videotapes of group meetings; and final assessment rubrics.

Resources:

Literature Circle Models - this site is filled with information on using literature circles. You can download many files to use in the classroom.

Literature Circle Book Picks - this site provides a listing of books used in a 5th grade classroom.

Assessing Literature Circles - this site will provide ways you can assess oral and written responses.

LiteratureCircles.com - this is the companion site for Daniel's book *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs & Reading Groups*. You will find information on classroom coaching, book recommendations, and there is a section for students.

Web English Teacher - this site provides many links and resources on literature circles.

Teaching Tips - this site provides tips and links to information on literature circles.

Literature e-Circles - this site from Intel provides a middle school lesson plan using literature circles.

Read-Write-Think Lesson Plan - this site provides a high school lesson plan that incorporates literature circles.

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