Providing Student Choice in Reading: Exploring Literature Circles with Elementary and Middle School Students

Presented by:
Kimberly Kimbell-López

Louisiana Reading Association Conference
Baton Rouge, Louisiana
November 8, 2007
Four Stages of Reading Maturity

1. Unconscious Delight
2. Read for a means of understanding your own problems
3. Read to examine philosophical problems
4. Pure enjoyment of reading—aesthetic

*Literature Circles* are comprised of small groups of students who have chosen to read the same book. *Literature Circles* are also referred to as literature discussion groups, book clubs, or transactional literature discussions. The texts can range from the same story, poem, article, or book. A major purpose of the *Literature Circles* is to change the way children talk about the texts they read.
Characteristics of Literature Circles

Key features of literature circles include (Daniels, 1994; 2002; Gambrell & Almasi, 1996; Roser & Martinez, 1995):

- children have choices in their reading material;
- small temporary groups are formed that read different books;
- students meet in discussion groups to collaboratively negotiate the meaning of the text;
- groups schedule discussions to meet periodically to discuss what has been read since the last meeting;
- students respond to the literature;
- the teacher’s role is that of facilitator;
- skills and strategies are addressed using the book as a reference point; and
- assessment consists of teacher observation, group evaluation, and self-evaluation.
To help students learn how to select a book, have a short minilesson that addresses guidelines for selecting a book. Robb (2000) suggests the following guidelines for students:

1. *A Book Is Too Easy If*…You can pronounce and understand all the words and can retell everything you have read.

2. *A Book Is Too Difficult If*…You can’t pronounce or don’t know the meanings of five words on the page and you can’t retell what you’ve just read.

3. *A Book Is A Perfect Fit If*…You can pronounce and understand all but one or two of the words and can retell most of what you have read.

Select a couple of books that range in levels. Look at each book together as a class and talk about each book using the three guides listed above.
Group Size in Literature Circles

Small Groups
- Usually small group format, but when introducing routines and procedures, some teachers have used a whole group format in order to reinforce routines and procedures that should be followed during the literature discussion group. A disadvantage to the small group format is that fewer topics may be introduced and fewer perspectives are shared.

Whole Groups
- Whole groups can be used when first starting literature circles to reinforce routines and procedures. Since the whole class has the same text to reference, then it can be used to model conferencing procedures as well as ways to respond in the literature journals. A disadvantage to using whole groups for literature circles are that not all of the students’ voices and perspectives may be shared. When there are a large number involved in the discussion, time becomes a factor when coordinating the reading, responding, and discussing.

Levels within groups
- The groups can be mixed with diverse abilities, sometimes it is good for children to be allowed to make these choices.
Types of Written Response During Reading of the Book

Dialogue Journals. A dialogue journal is a written conversation between two readers, student and adult expert (Atwell, 1987).

- Noll (1994) found that the use of dialogue journals allows for correspondence between the teacher and student and the exploration of literature between student, teacher, and peers.
- This type of journal encourages students to make the text their own. It can be kept using pencil/paper or electronically using a word-processor or via email.
- The dialogue between teacher and students is continued when they send a response back to the other person.

Literature Response Journals. The literature response journal is a journal for recording reactions to literature.

- Other names for this type of response include the reading journal, reading log, literature log, and reading response log.
- One way that this journal can be maintained is by either keeping it in a binder or folder where paper can be easily added.
- These journals could be a certain color, so that the teacher could glance around the room and determine that students were working on responses for their literature journals.
Assessment

Assessment measures that can be used to monitor and evaluate literature discussion groups include using a daily stamp, videotapes or audiotapes, teacher observation, student self-assessments, and reading logs.

*Daily Stamp.* Place a stamp on students’ reading logs as a way of noting entries are authentic, on topic, and ample. Each stamp can count for ten points, which then accumulated for an overall grade for keeping up and being ready (Daniels, 2002).

*Videotapes or Audiotapes.* One means of preserving a record of student conference sessions is to videotape the discussion groups during their scheduled conference time. Teachers can later review these tapes to determine how the groups are proceeding with their literature circle. The students could also listen to the tapes as a way of critiquing the group’s session. During or after a critique of the tape, group members can discuss their perceptions of how the conversation progressed and make recommendations for improving their discussions.

*Observations.* The observation can be the foundation for how assessment is completed as part of the literature discussion group. For example, Evans (2001) started by compiling a list of literacy indicators based on her belief regarding literacy learning. She made notes on lined paper as she observed students, then later transferred these notes to an observation grid that listed each of these literacy indicators. At the end of each literature cycle, the observation grid was analyzed to note student’s strengths and weaknesses. If a particular literacy indicator was not represented, then more explicit instruction in this area was provided.
### Basic Roles for Literature Circles

#### Connector
Connect what was read to their own lives, their feelings, and their experiences. Students could connect the book to events that happened at school or community, to current events, to similar events at other times and places, to other people, or other problems. Connections can also be made between the book that was read and other writings by the same author or on the same topic.

#### Questioner
This role involves the student writing down questions they have about the book. This could mean things they were wondering about as they read the story, questions they had about what was happening, or questions about the meaning of particular words.

#### Literary Luminary/Passage Master
This student’s role is to select quotations or special sections of the book for the group to discuss. Students can make a note about anything that was funny, puzzling, or interesting, and write down why each one was picked.

#### Illustrator
The job of the illustrator is to draw some kind of picture that relates to the reading. The illustration can be a sketch, cartoon, diagram, flowchart, or stick-figure scene.

#### Optional Roles for Literature Circles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Summarizer</strong></td>
<td>The role of the summarizer is to prepare a summary about what was read for that day. The summary should be a one to two minute statement that includes the key points of the day’s reading.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Researcher</strong></td>
<td>The researcher’s job is to find some information that helps the group to understand the book better. The information could be related to the topic of the book, the author, or such things as certain pictures, objects, or materials that illustrate elements of the book.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vocabulary Enricher/Word Wizard</strong></td>
<td>This job focuses on vocabulary from the story. The student with this role should look for puzzling or unfamiliar words, mark them in the book, then later look up the definition. When it is time for discussion, this role should help other members explore the words.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Travel Tracer/Scene Setter</strong></td>
<td>This role focuses on tracking the action that took place during the reading. The action can be described in detail using either words or diagrams.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Daniels, 2002.
### Literacy Indicators for Observing Literature Discussions

- Uses prior knowledge to construct meaning
- Relates book to personal experiences
- Makes predictions
- Uses the text to support predictions
- Recognizes imagery
- Personally identifies with character(s)
- Evaluates characters
- Places self in the story
- Questions the author
- Connects the book to other texts
- Asks questions to further understanding
- Draws inferences
- Retells/summarizes story
- Identifies theme
- Uses context to determine unknown vocabulary

From Evans, 2001.
Teacher Resources for Literature Circles


Other Professional Resources


Gilles, C. (1990). Collaborative literacy strategies: "We don't need a circle to have a group". In K.G. Short & K.M. Pierce (Eds.), Talking about books: Creating literate communities (pp. 55-68.). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.


