What’s the Next Big Thing with Literature Circles?

Back in the early 1980s, a number of teachers and students around the country simultaneously and independently invented the idea of literature circles. Pioneers like Becky Abraham Searle in Chicago and Karen Smith in Arizona began organizing their students into small, peer-led book discussion groups.

Soon, a number of teacher-authors, including Kathy Short, Jerome Harste, Carolyn Burke, Ralph Peterson, Maryann Eeds, Bonnie Campbell-Hill, Katherine Schlick-Noe, Nancy Johnson, and I began talking about this promising new practice, which mainly consisted of bringing the established adult literacy structure of voluntary reading groups into the public schools.

Twenty-five years later, millions of students have experienced some kind of book clubs or literature circles during their schooling. There are now dozens of professional books on the subject, offering guidance on starting and refining book clubs at various grade levels and across the curriculum. By most accounts, literature circles have been a valuable addition to many kids’ school experience, helping to grow more self-sustaining, lifelong readers. The Web abounds with teacher reports saying that “book clubs are my kids’ favorite time of the day” and “the caliber of the students’ conversations just blows me away.”

Of course, not all models of book clubs implemented around the country resemble the original versions. I recently observed the operation of one school’s literature circles, and when I walked in the first classroom, students were doing round robin reading—they just called it literature circles. Without being a purist (and without debating the merits of pre-1960s reading strategies), it seems fair to say that literature circles, as originally conceived by teachers like Becky and Karen, are not the same thing as round robin reading.

This is part of the wider problem of “terminology drift” in our profession. Someone invents a new idea or practice for use with kids, introduces it, explains it, and offers it to the teaching profession. Then the drift commences; the currents of fad and fashion carrying the idea ever further from its original anchorage, until it becomes the preferred label for some completely contradictory practice. I think of Nancie Atwell in this connection. In 1987, she codified a complex and elegant structure called “reading-writing workshop,” which includes a set of specific practices and excludes others. But today, everyone claims to have a reading workshop in their classroom, and many of them are filled with lecturing, assigned topics,
It’s only fair to admit that sometimes we authors, however inadvertently, create implementation problems ourselves. The 1994 first edition of my book *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom* promoted the use of a tool called “role sheets,” which assigned students various jobs like Questioner, Connector, Illustrator, Word Wizard, and Literary Luminary. I recommended these sheets as a way of showing kids how smart readers think (connecting, visualizing, inferring, and so forth), as well as to help students capture their reading responses in writing and to supply small-group discussions with plenty of material to talk about. I warned in the book that the role sheets were for temporary use only, but I soon saw them becoming predominant in too many classrooms. As a result, I wrote articles, developed a Web site, gave speeches, and ultimately wrote a new edition of the book with much stronger cautions about the mechanical discussions that can stem from over-dependence on these roles.

**Why Do Literature Circles Work?**

Despite the mini-controversy about role sheets, and assorted goof-ups by authors and implementers alike, literature circles have turned out to be an incredibly durable and sustainable classroom activity. Over and over, teachers in all corners of the world (most recent reports from Quebec, Finland, and Australia) have adopted, adapted, modified, and personalized the basic model. The consistent outcome is that kids are falling in love with books they have chosen and talked about with their friends. Why is this simple little activity so powerful and durable?

I categorize the answer with four words: engagement, choice, responsibility, and research.

**Engagement**

In a peer-led group of four or five, each student gets much more “airtime” and feels less risk than in a whole-class discussion. There is more “positive peer pressure” to join in when the group is small and run cooperatively by kids, not the teacher. Kids usually simplify this, saying that book clubs are (can we use the F-word in *Voices from the Middle*) more fun than other classroom activities.

**Choice**

When, with artful teacher guidance, kids get to pick their own books for reading and friends to read with, they can experience success, not frustration. Compare this to the typical teacher-chosen whole-class book, which is by definition too hard or too boring or too easy. In book clubs, everybody has a shot at getting a readable, interesting, just-right book for them, right now. That doesn’t mean we don’t also study some well-chosen whole-class books, but we alternate them with titles of choice.

**Responsibility**

As some sage once said, “School is a place where young people go to watch older people work.” Indeed, when 3 p.m. rolls around, you are probably a puddle beneath your desk, but the kids are dashing out of the classroom, bursting with energy and ready to play sports, scamper around the mall, and fall in and out of love a few times. What’s wrong with this picture? In book clubs, we ask kids to do everything that real adult readers do: choose a book, assemble members, create a reading and meeting schedule, establish ground rules, use writing to harvest responses as they read, sustain productive on-task conversations, perform various self-assessments, and keep their own records.
Research

In today’s data-driven school world (some people actually use that phrase with a positive connotation), every activity used with students must be backed by “scientific proof,” some numerical indication of higher achievement on a standardized test. So it is a good thing that we do have such evidence regarding the small, peer-led book discussions called literature circles or book clubs. Yes, when kids are engaged in well-structured book clubs, their comprehension and their attitude toward reading both improve. This seems to be true for students of many ages, and for those with disabilities as well as typical students, when the right accommodations are offered. For a quick look at these studies, see Tanya Auger’s 2003 review of literature circles or read Chapter 1 of my book Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups (2002, pp. 7–9).

But this large body of positive research on literature circles doesn’t necessarily settle the “scientific proof” question. Right now, by order of the current administration, the Institute of Education Sciences is investigating the efficacy of a number of popular reading strategies, including literature circles. Whether the structure is eventually validated will depend on what and how the researchers measure. Will they look at well-designed literature circles set up by veteran teachers using them as part of a balanced reading program? Or will they quickly train “neutral” or uninterested teachers (a common experimental practice) to use the strategy in classrooms with no established climate of collaboration? Will they measure the outcomes of literature circles with multiple-choice recall questions? Or will they use sensitive measures of understanding, recall, and application? These choices will determine whether the US Department of Education ultimately says that “literature circles work.”

What’s New with Book Clubs?

After doing workshops and visiting schools in more than half the states, I have seen what smart teachers are doing to make book clubs even more valuable for kids. Nancy Steineke and I discuss these refinements in Minilessons for Literature Circles (Heinemann, 2003), which identifies 45 ways that teachers and kids are polishing and updating their book clubs. Here are some of the highlights.

Out with Role Sheets!

Though a few teachers around the country seem to use role sheets effectively on a continuing basis, the great majority report the kind of problems noted above. In our own Chicago schools, teachers rarely use role sheets, but instead have kids capture their responses in reading response logs, on sticky notes (the favorite tool by far), on home-
made bookmarks (great for nonfiction), by using text coding, in drawn and graphic responses or in written conversations (more on that later).

**More Explicit Reading Strategy Training**

When Literature Circles were first being developed, the reading comprehension research of David Pearson and his colleagues was just entering the field, *The Mosaic of Thought* (Keene, 1997) was years away, and Stephanie Harvey and Ann Goudvis’s *Strategies That Work* (Stenhouse, 2000) was just a glimmer in their eyes. Most teachers were not aware of, much less teaching their students, the proficient-reader strategies that are now staples of our everyday teaching: questioning, connecting, inferring, visualizing, determining importance, and the rest. Today we name and teach those cognitive operations using instructional models like think-alouds, in which the teacher opens up her head and shows kids how smart readers think. In fact, we are now beginning to receive students in our middle schools who have learned these strategies already in the elementary grades. This gives us a huge head start in book clubs, as well as the rest of our balanced reading programs.

**More Explicit Social Skills Instruction**

In the early days, Literature Circles were promoted (by me as much as anyone) as a kind of if-you-build-it-they-will-come proposition. If you trained the groups properly, kids would do the reading, write brilliant notes, and join in vigorous, cerebral interactions about challenging books while the teacher beamed in the background. We now realize that peer-led reading groups need much more than a good launching; they require constant coaching and training by a very active teacher who uses minilessons and debriefings to help kids hone skills like active listening, asking follow-up questions, disagreeing agreeably, dealing with “slackers,” and more.

It was Nancy Steineke who taught me most about this in her vital and underappreciated book, *Reading and Writing Together: Collaborative Literacy in Action* (Heinemann, 2002). If you want to have an effective, productive, high-morale climate in your language arts classroom throughout the whole school year, you better get your hands on Nancy’s book. It explains something that, for some mysterious reason, most teachers are reluctant to hear about: the step-by-step moves you must take to guide the group dynamics in your classroom. Most of us teachers seem to want to believe that if we have “a golden gut” and “a heart for the kids,” that they will collaborate skillfully (and magically) with each other in small groups. Oh, so wrong.

**Extending into Nonfiction**

“Classic” literature circles have used sets of novels, and this has certainly been a great way to help kids find favorite authors and genres of fiction. But since lit circles are essentially well-structured collaborative learning applied to reading, the model is just as powerful and effective for nonfiction texts. Indeed, we now recognize that middle school students should be reading many of the same trade books that thoughtful, curious members of the adult community are reading. This means enjoying all or parts of Eric Schlosser’s muckraking exposé *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All American Meal*; Robert Kurson’s gripping *Shadow Divers: The True Adventure of Two Americans Who Risked Everything to Solve One of the Last Mysteries of World War II*; the scary and hopeful save-the-biosphere book, *The Future of Life* by Edward O. Wilson; and even *E=MC2: The History of the World’s Most Famous Equation*, by science writer extraordinaire David Bodanis.

**QUESTIONS FOR GUIDING MORE RESEARCH**

1. What kinds of note-taking best help young readers to prepare for productive peer-led discussions?
2. How can we make book clubs work better for students with disabilities and those who are learning English?
3. Do book club experiences lay a foundation for other small-group work across the curriculum?
4. Can we show that kids who have experienced book clubs in school do more voluntary reading into their adulthood?
5. How do book club experiences affect students’ writing?
New Models of Assessment

Back in the old days, teachers often assigned some sort of project at the end of each book club cycle, which typically involved writing a book review, designing a newer cover for the book, or making a diorama of a crucial scene. But our consciences were prodded by wise elders like Yetta Goodman (What do lifelong adult readers do when they finish a great book, Yetta wondered—make a diorama?). We still use projects from time to time, but as a special way of celebrating and advertising great books, not because we need something to grade. With that marketing intention in mind, we now favor performance-oriented projects over the more static types: readers theater, talk shows, tableaux, found poetry, song parodies, and the like.

We now assess students’ work in book clubs all along the way. We track both their literary and their discussion skills with a variety of tools, such as videotaped group meetings; teacher observations; forms that record kids’ preparation, participation, specific comments, and levels of thinking. Instead of giving “comprehension quizzes,” we collect the notes that kids prepare for each group meeting, whether on sticky notes, in journals, or on bookmarks. And when we ultimately have to assign a grade, we design a scoring rubric along with students. We ask them to list the traits of effective book club members and then assign points to each element (being prepared, building on the ideas of others, supporting your points with specific passages in the book, etc.). In this way, we bravely grade the activity itself—peer-led small literature discussions—rather than some surrogate outcome like a puppet show or diorama.

The Next Big Thing in Student-Led Discussion: Written Conversation

One of the strategies we have often used to train students for literature circles is dialogue journals, or, as we call it in Chicago, written conversation. In this kind of discussion, students write simultaneous notes to each other responding to the literature they are reading (or whatever subject is being studied in the classroom curriculum). Compare this kind of active, one-to-one exchange with standard “whole-class discussions” in which two or three kids monopolize the conversation (Me! Me! Me!) while everyone else sleeps with their eyes open. When everyone is “discussing” with a partner in writing, then potentially everyone is engaged and acting upon the subject matter.

You can have a written conversation while sitting side by side in real time, passing notes back and forth, or in letter form, where writers send “mail” for readers to answer when they get time. This may remind you of the literature letters in Nancie Atwell’s reading workshop—and it should, since Nancie’s classroom is one inspiration for this kind of curriculum-based letter writing. Students can write in pairs or around a circle of three or four, called a carousel or write-around. Look on the Web and you can find teachers using countless versions of this letter-writing strategy all across the country. Below, the teacher has asked students to write back and forth about why Walter Dean Myers chose to write his amazing novel Monster as a screenplay.

Student 132
I think he chose to write a screenplay because it seems like something that would be on TV. And, yes, I have felt like my life is a movie before many, many times. Mainly when I have a good day or a really bad day.

Student 141
Totally agreeing with you, many times I’ve thought of my life like a movie (or TV show, etc) but I think he chose to write his story as a screenplay because it made it more real, well, more interesting and how it actually happened.

Student 117
I think the reason the author chose a screenplay format is that it will help us to visualize the story more and “get that movie in our head” going so we will understand better what it is like to be in certain characters shoes.

It doesn’t seem necessary to point out all the visualizing, connecting, inferring, and other reading-as-thinking skills that are manifest in these exchanges.
In the schools where I am currently working, we are mining the potential of these written conversations for much more than literature circles training. Some teachers put students in yearlong partnerships, where two or three kids write to each other weekly about their independent reading, with the teacher entering these conversations periodically. Others have young students writing Friday letters to their parents, explaining the highlights of the week in school, with the parents writing a letter back to the kids over the weekend. Across the curriculum, content-area teachers put kids in pairs and then regularly interrupt their lectures for some written discussions: “Now, with your partner, have a quick conversation about what you understand and don’t understand about ionizing radiation.”

**Hey Melly,**

Did Mr. Gridley just say that microwaves give off ionizing radiation? I thought that kind was dangerous and I don’t understand why they would let them have something on our homes that’s dangerous. Did I just hear him wrong?

**Dear Rose,**

Yes, microwaves do give off ionizing radiation, which is dangerous. But microwaves give off such small amounts so they’re not dangerous. Mr. Gridley said that we can have only under 5,000 mREMs a year. Microwaves give off such small amounts that we won’t come close to reaching 5,000 millirems.

**Melly**

**Dear Melly,**

That still kinda creeps me out though. I don’t want to grow a third ear just because I wanted to make some oatmeal in my microwave.

**Jeez, Rose**

After this quick written exchange, the teacher seeks volunteers to share the different topics of their discussions, and he uses these as cues to review, explain, or clarify key points. And, of course, he collects the dialogues as part of his course assessment. The playfulness and energy of these quick exchanges keeps students engaged even in highly presentational courses, helps them remember key ideas, and assures kids that they are part of the class’s guidance system.

Can you begin to see the potential of this kind of writing? If you’re a teacher who’s using dialogue journals, written conversations, silent discussions, buddy journals, literature letters, or any other form of kid-to-kid or kid–teacher letter writing, please be in touch. My email is smokeylit@aol.com. I’m eager to hear what you’re up to. Maybe together we can start another wave of great reading and writing experiences for kids. It probably won’t be “writing circles,” but I am certain there is a very big idea lurking in letters.

**References**


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