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The Theories Informing Literature Circle Implementation

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The Theories
Informing
Literature Circle
Implementation

By Hillary Mills

Western Oregon University

Context of the Study

The background for my particular application of Literature Circles into the confines of my classroom stemmed from a general dissuasion among my students who looked at reading as more of a forced assignment than a pleasurable activity. My class did a lot of silent reading, reading in pairs and listening to audio tapes and would generally follow that up with a series of questions that were provided to them to answer in order to ensure they were, first, listening to what they were reading and, second understanding what they were reading. As a result of our present methodology and general lack of enthusiasm for reading showcased by our students, I started researching alternative ways to the typical read-and-test or read-and-do-a-project method of reading to understand that exists in so many classrooms. One method I kept stumbling upon in my research was Literature Circles, which is the basis for this addend to my work sample that I completed for my undergraduate teacher certification program at Western Oregon University in the spring of 2009.

Houck Middle School in Salem, Oregon, has a significantly diverse population – from Caucasian to Hispanic, from affluent to destitute, from incarcerated family members and students being raised by grandparents to the stereotypical 1950's family where mothers stayed at home and dad brought home the bacon, from illiterate to literate students, from drug users and gang affiliated students to students needing protective services called for them and from pregnant teens to non-sexually active teens. As a result of these disparate life situations, my mentor teacher and I began discussing the types of literature

that we could incorporate into a Literature Circle unit that would last for eight weeks (she would teach a month and I would teach a month) and would meet the varying levels in reading capabilities, relatable material and other such qualities of a book that would show students that reading is a pleasurable activity when one finds the right book – one in which they can understand, relate to and learn from.

My mentor teacher and I then went to the library and selected books, which ranged from short poetry books to teen best sellers to historical fiction to science fiction and so forth. We also picked out several books in each reading level and genre and then we did a book talk on each book, so that students could pick their own books based on content, genre, reading ability and general interest instead of going to a certain group based on where their friends went or, worse, having my mentor teacher and me assign them a book to read. However, this method did allow my mentor teacher and I the opportunity to ensure that our students were reading books, which we deemed as “quality text” – text that we felt would offer them an exposure to new vocabulary, ideas, genres, writing styles, grammatical usage and so forth. Titles of some of the works we offered are as follows: *The Uglies* by Scott Westerfield and *Love that Dog* by Sharon Creech.

Based on copious amounts of research and endless discussions with my mentor teacher who had previous experience with Literature Circles, I asked students to do each of the following roles in their respective composition books: Discussion Director, Illustrator, Literary Luminary, Vocabulary Enricher and

Connector. These particular roles were designed in order to give students specific roles that they were responsible for completing throughout the Literature Circle unit and also to help spur meaningful discussions on literature by scaffolding the information with very specific expectations. A detailed discussion of the roles above can be referenced in “The Roles and Jobs in Literature Circles” section on pages 12 through 16.

Throughout the duration of the project, students rotated roles so that, by the end of the cycle, they had done all the roles. By switching roles, students were forced to work on different cognitive tasks, focus on different cognitive perspectives related to their reading and draw on different intelligences to process the text at higher levels (Lamb, 1999). Because my population of students was so driven by a need for variety, I believed that alternating roles would meet that need. It would also provide students with an avenue for practicing alternate intelligences (linguistic, spatial, logical-mathematical, intrapersonal and interpersonal), which would help them hone their skills and fill their arsenal with deductive and inductive reasoning, comprehension, summarizing, analyzing and other methods for understanding language tools, which would help them on the OAKS state test at the culmination of the year.

In addition, “rotating roles keep the discussions fresh and interesting and allows students to each take different leadership responsibilities. By alternating roles every other day or so, the students were encouraged to focus on different cognitive perspectives related to their reading and draw on different intelligences” (Lamb, 1999). Leadership, another quality that was missing from many of my

students' lives, is an important bi-product of this method of dissecting literature, which forces each student at one time or another to be a leader and, at others, to be a listener.

Literature Circles: What are they?

Literature Circles are small interactive groups designed to study a given piece of literature through discussion and an exploration of different points of view in order to get a deeper and more enriched understanding of a piece of literature. According to Harvey Daniels, author of *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom*, literature circles are “small, temporary discussion groups of students who have chosen to read the same work of literature” in which “each member agrees to take specific responsibilities during discussion sessions” (Schlick, Noe, 2004). Annette Lamb, in her article entitled *Encouraging Active Reading through Book-Technology Connections*, adds to the loose definition of Literature Circles that Daniels provided when she writes, “This strategy [learner-centered approach] engages students in higher-level thinking and reflection by encouraging collaboration and constructing meaning with other readers. These literacy discussions are guided by student insights, observations, and questions” (Lamb, 1999).

This is the reason, as I described on pages 2 through 5 under “Context of the study,” that I asked students to take responsibility for rotating through all of the roles. By giving them the choice in their corresponding books and holding them individually accountable for different roles, I gave them an opportunity to be actively engaged in their own learning and also gave them the chance to work

with students that they would not normally work with. This, I hoped, would expose them to different viewpoints, ideas, concepts and perspectives. For instance, if a student ended up in a group that hosted a variety of students who varied in age (some with September Birthdays and some with August Birthdays), maturity level, cultural background, lineage and religion, he/she would be exposed to a breadth of opinions on, hypothetically, the topic of racism on the basis of religion during the Holocaust. In this particular group and on this particular topic, the student who is Christian would have a very different opinion from the student who is say Jewish as would the child who may have grown up in a hard neighborhood and potentially been the target of a hate crime as opposed to the student who comes from a two-parent home. In the end, it is the very differences in our lives that give us controversy, consensus and diversity and, by having students work through these differences and listen to each other's opinions, they can learn to look at situations, text and life in a general sense in a myriad of ways. Hopefully, it is this ability to see different views that would lead to a more personal connection with the material and, optimistically, a further desire to read at the unit's end.

Why Use Literature Circles in the Classroom?

Before deducing the reasons behind Literature Circle implementation into a classroom, it is important to look at the manner in which literature enhances learning in the first place. Strube notes that learning and teaching with literature is built on the following four principles:

1. "Story is a way to explore and enrich life.

2. Interpretation comes from readers actively engaged in the reading process of making meaning by what they bring to and take from the text.
3. Children have the innate ability of being meaning makers.
4. Dialogue provides the best means of understanding and explaining literature” (Strube, 1996).

These principles are part of what is considered a literature-based approach to teaching where:

1. Students choose their own books.
2. Students choose books that fit their own purposes.
3. Students use strategies to sample the text.
4. Students interpret what they read.
5. Students respond to the text verbally and in written form” (Strube, 1996).

These principles provide an important framework for Literature Circles, which incorporate student-centered decisions on content (the student gets to pick what he/she reads), a variety of strategies (the roles I provided for each student to be responsible for) and an opportunity for students to respond to the text both individually (writing their respective roles down in their composition books) and collaboratively (discussing their literature in a group). Taking these parts for what they are (methods for student-centered learning), it becomes fairly easy to extend these concepts about fiction to other genres as well. For instance, if a student were to be reading a poetry book or a science fiction book, the roles

used in a learner-based classroom would be the same. We would allow students to choose their own books, apply the roles to their respective books and work in a group as well as individually to interpret what they read. In fact, the word “story” in the first belief of learning and teaching with literature can just as easily be substituted with the word “literature” or even “text” as all literature broadens and enhances our range of knowledge and wisdom to some degree or another.

Literature Circles are fundamentally collaborative and, through collaboration, students are forced to work together to reach a mutually satisfactory conclusion. Alternately, when students work alone, they are forced to compete with other students, which place the importance on the competition and not on the accrual of knowledge. In my particular classroom, it was a constant race to see which student finished their books first and what page so-and-so got to at the end of a reading session. In other words, the emphasis was placed on the competition of the number of pages read and NOT, as we as educators hope, on the new things that they had learned from the text. As a result, by having students work collaboratively, we circumvented the need for competition because, in Literature Circles, students cannot read beyond a specified page number decided upon by the group (See “Implementation of Literature Circles into my Classroom” on pages 16 through 26) and must have a weekly group discussion, which has to include each individual role provided by each student in the group.

Simply put, “collaboration opens up a world of possibilities to the whole group. According to Ralph Peterson, there is a big advantage in having students

with diverse interests, backgrounds, and experiences work together” (Strube, 1996). This advantage stems from the fact that, “when a community of readers shares interpretations, they create different interpretations that intensify the meaning-making possibilities for the whole group” (Strube, 1996). In my classroom, the statements on diversity could not be more true. Each student brings a different dynamic to the group, which only enhances the other students’ learning by forcing them to interpret a text from their peers’ varying points of view. This sharing of beliefs based on students’ diverse backgrounds can be likened to traveling around the world and experiencing a wealth of different countries, customs and ways of life. When one travels, he/she is exposed to an entirely new way of life – a life in which he/she does not necessarily fit in. Similarly, in the group, each student has a different “country” so to speak that he/she lives in (a different home life, rearing, list of experiences, beliefs, customs and so forth), which opens up the door for personal growth and an accrual of knowledge by sharing individual stories and accepting different points of view. This acceptance and sharing of stories enhances the words on a page tenfold and makes the connection between the reader and the text much more vivid.

In Literature Circles, it is also important to have students write their responses to their reading before they share with their group members because then students have time to reveal “immediate and personal reactions to the text” (Strube, 1996). For a lot of my students, this was an important opportunity for them to write down those things that came immediately to mind without having to share what, upon further reflection, they may have deemed as a “stupid” question

or reaction to the text. In essence, writing down their thoughts first allowed them the opportunity to filter through their jumbled thoughts before they were asked to share their thoughts with the entire group.

That being said, discussion is just as important as writing it down because it allows the students to “reveal to one another their thoughts and concerns about the ideas the literature created in their minds” (Strube, 1996). Thus, by having students discuss their ideas, they could flush through their varying responses to the text and perhaps discover a thought that they had not previously had or build upon a mutual reaction that several of the group members had. This strategy of writing, reading and sharing in a group “engages students in higher-level thinking and reflection by encouraging collaboration and constructing meaning with other readers. These literary discussions are guided by student insights, observations, and questions” (Lamb, 1999).

Exploring both the need to be able to understand reading and respond in written form to a piece of literature brings up the topic of the reading-writing connection. We, as educators, realize that reading and writing are communicative in nature and, thus, that “the skills underlying reading and writing knowledge and processes are similar” and that “the combination of reading and writing instruction is essential in literacy development” (“Reading-Writing Connection”). As a result, Literature Circles is the perfect forum for blending the connection between reading and writing together by simply blending tasks together.

For instance, in the mini-lessons I incorporated into my Literature Circle

unit (summarizing and re-reading), I tried to show students that, “in reading, meaning is built *from* text and in composing, meaning is built *for* text. Therefore, reading is the construction of meaning through relationships of parts from the text and prior knowledge, while writing is relating our prior knowledge and experiences to the text by putting meaning on the page” (“Reading-Writing Connection”). This quotation draws a nice definition of the role of the connector in my particular application of Literature Circles, as the connector’s job is to associate their prior knowledge and experiences to the text and then write their connections down before they discuss them with the group. This is important because research suggests that “students’ reading and writing abilities are complimentary and growth in one skill inevitably leads to growth in the other (i.e., students become better readers by strengthening their writing skills and vice versa)” (Smith). However, that being said, writing done in Literature Circles is done to support reading, but reading is not necessarily done to support writing development.

Lastly, Strube says that literature helps students view themselves as readers who make meaning. Students “believe they are readers when:

1. Their own thoughts create meaning from the text.
2. They tell others what they believe the text means.
3. They become good listeners to other interpretations” (Strube, 1996).

The first fundamental principle based on theory, “Their own thoughts create meaning from the text,” validates the individual student’s life experiences and beliefs because, when they read about a similar thing happening to a character in

a book or that has happened throughout history, they feel like they are not the sole people in the world who have felt that way or experienced that and, therefore, they feel a connection to the text, which spurs in them a desire to read on.

Similarly, students become further validated when they are given a forum within which they can voice their opinions on what the text meant to themselves. One of my students mentioned that he really liked the smaller group dynamic because he was always too shy to share his thoughts with the entire class, but he felt safer and more valued when he was in a small group setting.

The last principle then is true of Literature Circles because the smaller group dynamic does force students to practice being good listeners (they will only be listened to if they listen to others), which is something I noticed throughout the unit. A lot of my students were more involved in the process of reading and they were so excited to share their individual opinions that they were often too anxious to listen, but, because they wanted their opinion heard, they would wait their turn.

As a result of the aforementioned principles, Literature Circles seem like an important strategy to use in the classroom since they foster a student's need to react to text, collaborate with other individuals to make meaning and allows them individuality by giving them choices in their own learning.

Roles and Jobs in Literature Circles

With Literature Circles explicated on preceding pages, I find it important to discuss the specific roles that were used in this unit to create meaningful discussions over individual literature books. However, before delving into the

specific roles, I find it just as important to briefly explain how these roles were utilized in my classroom.

First, there were five roles based on Harvery Daniel's approach, which my mentor teacher, literacy coach and I modeled for students, verbally explained to them and wrote down for students to refer to (I made laminated copies of each role/job for each Literature Circle group). My mentor teacher, occasionally the literacy coach and I modeled the roles and mini-lessons for the students by enlisting the aid of a mentor text (text used to facilitate learning), which most students were familiar with (*Twilight* by Stephanie Meyers) in order to entice my students and provide them with a tangible/explicit example of each of the five roles/jobs inherent in a meaningful conversation about text. In addition to the use of a familiar mentor text, my mentor teacher, literacy coach and I did "think alouds," where we explicitly catalogued our thinking process as we were re-reading (i.e. "Hmmm. I'm not really sure what happened here, so I'm going to re-read this passage and see if I can understand it better.") or summarizing (i.e. "This chapter was about Bella being lured to the ballet studio by James.") a given piece of literature in order to aide with our comprehension of the novel. I used *Twilight* because I thought it would be beneficial as it would provide most students with a frame of reference because most of them had read the series and they could, therefore, focus more on what it was my mentor teacher, the literacy coach or I was doing in each job/role, when we were summarizing or re-reading portions of the text rather than being hung up on the content of our examples.

In my portion of the teaching, I also provided color-coded examples of the positive/negative map and summary paragraph, so students had a reference when they were writing their first summary paragraphs and my mentor teacher, literacy coach and I modeled several hypothetical discussions, which involved a discussion on what rules we wanted to follow in our group and what was expected of each role/job. For instance, I drew pictures for the Illustrator and modeled how the role should look both in the composition book and in the discussion and had students practice the role either using my book (different symbols) or a book of their choosing before I had them practice the role in their individual literature books, which would be graded.

That being said, students were expected to rotate roles/jobs every other day or so and were expected to complete each role/job at least once (twice if time allowed) and then they were given the freedom to decide amongst their group who would be responsible for what role during which discussion. Students were provided the model of each role/job and the laminated copy of each role/job, which explained what the roles/jobs entailed and were, therefore, allowed to circulate these roles/jobs amongst group members as long as they tried each role once. I made it this way because I wanted each student to try each role/job at least once so that they could practice, but I also wanted them to express themselves in a manner that they saw fitting for responding to the text. In other words, I mandated a minimal requirement that they must rotate jobs (authoritative decision making on my part), but implemented individual choice into the unit by allowing them to decide among group members who would be

responsible for which role throughout the week as long as it was understood that each role had to be covered and one person could not monopolize one role week after week.

That being explained, the roles and resulting jobs are as follows:

- *Discussion Director*: This role/job deals with asking a series of questions (four to be exact). The first question is posed to prompt a discussion (a conversation starter), which is then followed by interjecting two particular questions the student doing this job has as he/she is reading into the body of the unfolding discussion and then, lastly, asking a question meant to summarize or conclude the discussion (a discussion closer).
- *Illustrator*: This role/job deals with drawing a visual representation (a comic strip, an image, a flow chart or a diagram) of some aspect of a student's literature book. The purpose is to show the other members of this student's group the picture and let them infer its meaning. Only after this has been completed does the Illustrator explain the meaning behind his/her visual representation.
- *Connector*: This role/job deals with connecting the material a student's group is reading to themselves as an individual (a personal connection to something that has happened to them or in their life), another book they have read (a literature connection) and the world or reality (a global connection). The student doing this job must draw his/her connection to a specific quotation, excerpt, passage or chapter in the

book for members to look at as the connection is being made.

- *Literary Luminary*: This role/job deals with finding a selection in a student's book that is funny, important, puzzling, interesting or uses powerful words that the student doing this job wants to pose to his/her group to re-read.
- *Vocabulary Enricher*: This role/job deals with looking for interesting, important or confusing words in a given piece of literature for a student's group. This student is supposed to draw the group's attention to the chosen word and then use context clues and a dictionary to surmise the definition of the word, which might impact understanding.

Implementation of Literature Circles into my Classroom

The purpose of my portion of the Literature Circle unit was to teach students how to use the comprehension strategies of summarizing and re-reading and help them learn how to respond to a piece of literature in a myriad of ways. In particular, students were expected to gain an understanding of how to ask questions relative to a given selection or reading, make connections between the given piece of literature and themselves, the world and other books, look for vocabulary that they did not recognize and use context clues and a dictionary to learn the word's meaning, draw illustrations that depict important aspects of the novels and, finally, find important passages that are worthy of re-reading for better comprehension. Major concepts and sub-concepts of the unit were as follows:

1. Summarizing, further described in this section on pages 24 and 25, is

the process of taking the most important events in a book and comprising a focused account of the central idea of a given piece of literature.

2. Re-reading is the process of reading a given passage or excerpt over again in order to find nuances in the text that were not apparent at first, make connections, look at it from a different perspective and so forth.

Essentially, it is the process of reading something anew in order to catch things that students may have missed during their initial reading of the passage.

3. The specific roles that are addressed to aide with constructive and meaningful discussions over individual literature books are as follows:

Discussion Director, Illustrator, Literary Luminary, Connector and Vocabulary Enricher. Please refer to "Roles and Jobs in Literature Circles on pages 12 through 16 for a thorough account of each of these roles.

In terms of my unit and its relationship to standards, Literature Circles, as a mode of responding to a variety of texts in a given classroom, is not explicitly referred to in the Oregon Department of Education Standards. However, a lot of the comprehension strategies and skills embedded in responding to literature are. These include the following two predominant Oregon Department of Education Standards (listed first) and two less explicitly referred to Standards, which my unit derives its objectives from:

EL.07.RE.06 Understand and draw upon a variety of comprehension strategies as needed-re-reading, self-correcting, summarizing, class and

group discussions, generating and responding to essential questions, making predictions, and comparing information from several sources.

EL.07.LI.03 Identify and/or summarize sequence of events, main ideas, facts and supporting details in literary selections.

EI.07.RE.03 Make connections to text, within text, and among texts across the subject areas.

EI.07.RE.12 Clarify word meanings through the use of definition, inference, example, restatement, or contrast.

These standards are enhanced by the content of my unit in that they are skills that my students should be able to master at the culmination of the unit. In other words, by using Literature Circles as a mode of responding to a variety of texts in a given classroom, my students should be able to comprehend their given texts through the strategies of re-reading and summarizing and should be able to respond to text by asking questions, finding vocabulary that is hindering understanding, drawing visual representations of some aspect of their reading, connecting the text to themselves, their world or other books and, finally, finding important passages worthy of re-reading in order to enhance understanding.

With the roles clearly delineated above in the section entitled “Roles and Jobs in Literature Circles” on pages 12 through 16, it becomes necessary to relay how these roles were implemented into the confines of the unit. First, students were separated into groups of five to six students who were at a similar reading level, which is known as ability grouping. Though this methodology causes a lot of controversy, it is necessary in Literature Circles in order to get students into

groups that are similarly skilled, have a closer proximity in reading level and are better equipped to have meaningful conversations at their individual levels. Pam Chandler, a sixth grade English, reading and social studies teacher in California says that ability grouping in Literature Circles is necessary so that “each circle can choose a book appropriate for its reading level” (Schlick, Noe, 2004). From there, students were given a choice as a group to select an appropriately leveled book to read (a range of which was chosen by my mentor teacher and me) and then were given a laminated card of each of the five roles and were expected to divide and alter the roles and jobs each student was responsible for each week.

Students were also given composition books (also known as literature logs) where they were expected to write down their roles. The Composition Books were broken down as follows:

- Title Page
- Group Norms
- Number of Pages Read and Character/Setting
- List of Events
- Vocabulary
- Predictions and Inferences
- Roles and Jobs
- Context Clues
- Summarizing Notes

The composition books were broken down in the aforementioned manner because these categories aligned with my instructional purposes in this particular

unit and held the students individually accountable for their own work. In other words, I could use the composition books as a checkpoint to ensure that they were contributing to their groups and actually practicing all of the roles instead of just taking part in the discussions and reading. I discussed these categories at great length with my mentor teacher and strove to align my objectives with the state standards I was focusing on as well as incorporate some extraneous mini-lessons my mentor teacher asked me to include in order to aid with state testing preparation. So, while the breakdown of their composition books was solely my decision, a fair portion of the actual work that went into each role was decided upon by each individual group. Please refer to pages 12 through 19 of this section for more detail on the instructional purposes of this unit.

The first thing was the title page, which I incorporated simply because I needed to know whose composition book it was and what book he/she was reading. In other words, this was an informational page for me while I was grading and had no actual relevance to the Literature Circle unit.

The first important section was “group norms,” which were the rules that the students established in the beginning of the unit with their group members; it is, essentially, the “contract” between group members about the rules they will follow for the duration of the unit. These rules, varying from literature group to literature group, were written down in their individual composition books and were signed by all students in the group. The rules that some of the students came up with included things such as “Listen when someone else is talking,” “Don’t read beyond the page number we decided on” and “Complete

assignments on time.” If the contract was broken, I tried to leave a lot of the resolutions up to the individual groups to help them with their problem management skills, but I would intervene if there were things such as persistent absences, lack of respect and so forth. However, to help micromanage this process, I did provide students with time to rate their team members, which served as my guide for participation grades. These participation grades were then combined with the scores that they received from their written work and notes I made while walking around the classroom and listening to their conversations take place. So, in essence, their grades could be affected by the group evaluations, which was really the only consequence that was implemented. See “Thoughts for Future Implementation” on pages 41 through 42.

The number of pages read was simply a way to have the students micromanage the number of pages they need to read each day for their individual book in order to finish it by the end of the unit. For my more advanced readers, the number of pages read in a week was about 60 and, for my less advanced readers, approximately 30. Students were expected, at the beginning of the unit, to look at the number of pages they had to read (the number of pages in the book) and the number of days they were provided in class to read it in to decide how many pages they needed to read each day. Essentially, they were asked to create a timeline for their group to follow to ensure that they completed the requirements within the timeframe we had to work with. I also gave them the opportunity to decide if they wanted to read on weekends or not, so that they

would have more time in the classroom to work on their individual roles/jobs if they so desired. Though this portion was solely on the part of the students, I did glance over their timelines to ensure that they were making logical choices in reading where they were not reading too much or too little on any given day. They also knew that, should they finish a section of their reading days before they were supposed to and one of their rules were “Don’t read beyond the number of pages we decided on,” they would be expected to re-read their sections.

The next section, “Character/Setting,” was the place where students wrote down information they came across as they read about the introduction of new characters and changes in setting in order to help them keep track of changes in the book. This was a section I thought was important to have them do because, in my previous experiences with this population, they would forget from day-to-day what they had read, who the characters were and what had transpired in the book. As a result, this was a way of forcing students to track important information from the book as well as a way for me to ensure that students were actually reading their books.

The third section entitled “List of Events” was a place for students to list important events that were transpiring as a reference for them as well as keeping them accountable for following what they were reading. I also added this category because, as part of my mini-lessons on summarizing, students were going to be making a positive and negative graph that would force them to rank which events were the most important (+ 5) and which were the least important (-

5) as a way for them to visually acknowledge what is important before they needed to incorporate the important events into their summaries (Rief,1992).

I tried to scaffold student thinking in this portion of the unit by having them make a list of events and rank the events in the manner described in the last paragraph on page 22. From there, I had students take the events that ranked the highest on their positive and negative maps and write their own summaries of their books. However, I did provide a color-coded example of my positive and negative map, which corresponded to the introductory sentence, first event, second event, third event and concluding sentence of my summarizing paragraph, so students could visually see the connection between the two tasks.

Vocabulary was the section where students wrote down the vocabulary words provided by the “Vocabulary Enricher” and the corresponding definition in order to help them learn new words. The reasoning behind my only having students look for vocabulary instead of sentence structure and punctuation stems from the sheer fact that, outside of the Literature Circle unit, we were working on sentence construction and punctuation in our writing unit and a lot of the students were already receiving individual instruction on these two topics in their English Language Learners classes, so my mentor teacher and I decided to just focus on the skill of deducing a word’s meaning by using context and morphological (prefixes, suffixes and base words) clues and, for a lot of our students, teaching them how to use a dictionary.

“Predictions and Inferences,” the next section, was the place where students would make predictions, guesses or inferences about what they thought

might transpire next in their books as they were reading.

The bulk of this composition book, not surprisingly, was reserved for the “Roles and Jobs” section where students were responsible for recording the information necessary for each job that they did each week. These roles can be referenced in the section entitled “Roles and Jobs in Literature Circles” on pages 12 through 16.

The next section was “Context Clues,” which was added to my work sample in order to meet the needs of upcoming state tests and included worksheets on using context clues to figure out a word’s definition. These were also exercises that taught students about base words, prefixes and suffixes, which were all utilized to help them figure out a word’s meaning. These morphological clues tied in with the Vocabulary Enrichers job in the sense that they could use their knowledge of prefixes and suffixes and their meanings to deduce a word’s meaning. They could even look for base words within a larger word that they do not know in order to figure out a word’s meaning.

The final section was “Summarizing Notes,” which was also added for state testing purposes and included a couple of mini-lessons on summarizing, which were easily implemented into my particular unit though it is not generally a required portion of Literature Circles. That being said, however, this is a task that is normally informally utilized. The two standards that I addressed with these mini-lessons of summarizing can be referenced on pages 17 and 18 in the “Implementation of Literature Circles into my Classroom” section.

I also provided a mini-lesson on summarizing, which forced students to

take some notes and I described that summarizing, for the purposes of this unit, is the process of taking the most important events in a book and writing a focused paragraph of the central idea of a given piece of literature. They were given a scripted paragraph to begin with, which asked them to write an introductory and concluding sentence and then provide three body sentences, which denoted the three most important events from the book. While this scripted type of writing is not generally valued in the classroom, it was designed to teach students the framework of a summary paragraph so that they could embellish it with the important facts and divulge what it was their books were about. Finally, students were given a practice session in which I read a paragraph and they had to provide me with a summary sentence that told me what the main idea of the passage was. This activity really helped students understand the difference between relevant and superfluous information.

I designed these composition books in the aforementioned manner in order to achieve what Nancie Atwell so eloquently writes about literature logs for non-fiction literature in her book entitled "Coming to Know: Writing to Learn in the Intermediate Grades:"

Children's log entries are informal, tentative, first draft and brief, usually consisting of no more than ten minutes of focused free writing. The teacher poses questions and situations or sets themes that incite students to observe, speculate, list, chart, web, brainstorm, role-play, ask questions, activate prior knowledge, collaborate, correspond, summarize, predict or shift to a new perspective: in short, to participate in their own

learning (Atwell, 1990).

While this is definitely true of non-fiction, the same logic can be applied to fictional pieces of work as well. For instance, in *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, Katniss, the main character, goes to fight for her life in a last-person-standing-is-the-winner game that the government hosts to remind the Districts of their failed attempt at revolution. This book, though obviously fictional in nature, could be dissected in the same manner that Atwell suggests for non-fiction pieces of literature because students could speculate as to whether or not they think Katniss will win the games, categorize her survival skills by her knowledge of botany or her hunting prowess, summarize her survival skills in the ring, have students discuss the themes of friendship, survival, revolution and so forth. In short, the things that we ask students to do for non-fiction books can easily be applied to fictional books because a lot of fiction draws upon a knowledge of non-fictional things to make their characters come alive.

The remainder of this discussion will be broken down by role in order to allow ample room to describe the theories that informed my decisions on each specific role in the Literature Circle unit I taught.

Discussion Director

As mentioned previously, the Discussion Director has a very important role in the discussion: he/she is the one responsible for beginning and wrapping up the conversation as well as interjecting questions throughout the discussion to keep it going. As Nancy Atwell writes, "Writing questions was another way that students focused attention on and generated information" (Atwell, 1990). By

asking students to pose questions that are inherently interesting to them and allowing them time to collaborate with their team members, students are given a rich environment in which they can expand their knowledge. For instance, one of my students who was reading *The Uglies* by Scott Westerfield wrote an introductory question that asked his group members whether they thought Tally, the main character, was going to go through with the operation to make her pretty. This question, based on the initial conflict in the novel, invites personal opinion from a variety of team members and forces the other students in the group to generate a discussion on whether obligation (the government mandates that Tally get the operation) or personal choice (Tally does not really want to be pretty and superficial) wins out.

Also, by prompting students to pose an introduction question that they write before they begin reading or near the very beginning of the section they are reading, we see students write questions that are predictive in nature, which “help students get an idea of the content of the text before they read it” (Langer). This is important because it helps students get in a frame of mind that will better lend them to making connections as they read. For instance, a child reading *The Giver* by Lois Lowry might look at the novel and wonder if the elderly gentleman on the front is the person giving something or may even inquire as to what they think the title of the book or a chapter might mean. However, it is important to note that these questions are written before a given section is read and is posed to the group for starting the discussion.

However, predictive questions are not the only types of questions students

can ask. If students are confused about something that is transpiring in the text, they can ask informational questions of their group members for clarification. However, students can also ask connection questions. “The goal of connection questions is to help students build background knowledge by connecting their prior experiences to the text. As a guided reading strategy, these connecting questions also help students associate their primary discourse with the text” (Langer). In other words, students make comparisons between their own lives and the text, which help them garner meaning that is more personally relevant.

Illustrator

The next role involves using images, symbols, graphs, tables and so forth to depict an important aspect of the novel that a particular student is reading. In my application of Literature Circles, students were asked to consider color, shade and shape in their designs and to connect their images with a particular passage in the book and cite these in their composition books. Nancie Atwell had her students work on illustrating what they were reading about the earth and moon for non-fictional text and had this to say: “The log prompt helped the kids to graphically represent differences and similarities, to juxtapose and consider earth and moon, and to organize their distinct features. Classifying is also an aid in organizing information” (Atwell, 1990).

While the art work they created for the earth and the moon is non-fiction in nature, this was true of some of the things that my students acknowledged about making lists and a positive and negative graph that asked students to rank their list of events on a scale of negative five (not important) to positive five (extremely

important) events in their books and draw symbols to represent these events on their graphs, which forced them to use their graphical organization skills. Please see pages 22 and 23 in the “Implementation of Literature Circles into my Classroom” portion for more detail on the positive/negative maps. In this way, students were asked to classify information based on importance and to use a graph to visually depict this classification. This method of positive and negative maps is easily implemented for different genres of literature, which is how Atwell’s discussion of non-fiction text in the classroom compares to other genres of literature as well.

In my classroom, students were also asked to draw images from their books and connect those images to the text they were reading in some manner. For instance, one of my students, a talented illustrator, was reading *Twilight* by Stephanie Meyers outside of class and drew a beautiful mural that included an image of a mirror, ballet slippers and other extraneous symbols that all symbolized some aspect of the novel. She explained that the mirror symbolized both the scene where James lures Bella to the ballet studio as well as a reflection of Bella’s character and the manner in which she sees things as they are shown and not as they really are. Similarly, this particular student explained that the ballet slippers obviously symbolized the ballet studio that was supposed to be the place of Bella’s death, but it also symbolizes her childlike character, which is depicted in her innocence, clumsiness and naïveté. When this child posed her symbols to the group, it generated a huge discussion on other symbols that could represent Bella, which, to my sincere appreciation, garnered a staggering

delineation between Bella and an apple, which, in the Garden of Eden, is a forbidden fruit in much the same way that Bella is forbidden to Edward as a human.

Zitlow explains the importance of images extraordinarily well in the following passage, which heightens the neural connections existing between mental images and words:

An important way we as people think and learn is by using images, such as visual connections and sound associations. The use of images, or imagery, is a primary underlying structure in language, media, and mind. It is a basic element in communicating and creating, an integral part of thinking, speaking, listening, reading and writing. Language and images are inextricably linked – in how we generate them, how we make meaning from them, how we use them, and how we remember them. We think in flashes and bursts of images, in descriptive fragments that are like ‘Lights in the Windows’ (Nye). Images point to the nature of our human condition, to the experiences we remember, visualize, and come to understand as we stabilize them in the acts of reading and writing (Zitlow, 2000).

In other words, visualizing what is transpiring in a book is a natural and reflective impulse for humans to do and asking students to tangibly express these images on paper helps them cement these images in their mind and draw distinct parallels between the image in their mind and the words on the page. This is precisely what Rief explains when she writes, “Like the process of writing, through which the writer discovers new thoughts, new ideas, new directions, the

process of painting revealed new images, new feelings. The breakthrough for all the students came as they moved from the realistic to the abstract” (Rief, 1992). Unlike the previous quotation however, this quotation heightens the emotional experience that stems from reading and visualizing.

Lastly, there is an important personal connection that exists in the experience of reading because we all bring our own experiences to the text and this is the same for looking at art. Rief notes this distinction when she writes, “Sarah knows they *showed* what they meant and felt and therefore didn’t need to tell or explain what it was about. They are also aware that viewers or readers bring their own experience to a text and take their own meaning from it” (Rief, 1992). This is the reasoning behind my asking the students to share their illustration with their group members *before* they were asked to explain its importance. By giving students the chance to interpret the art on their own, students can draw multiple connections between the art and the book, which heightens and broadens the scope of the discussion.

Literary Luminary

The Literary Luminary’s job is to pick out passages that are important, funny, scary or have some other importance to the novel that a student feels is worthy of bringing to the groups’ attention for re-reading. Passages could be picked based upon their use of literary techniques (metaphor, simile, personification), which Zitlow describes when she writes, “Readers experience meaning through the elements that contribute to the literary qualities of narrative, namely the metaphor, imagery, dialogue, and description in the written work”

(Zitlow, 2000). By providing literary-rich texts to students – books that include interesting vocabulary, various sentence constructions and literary tools such as alliteration and simile, we can help students realize “that language can be used in many ways and can accomplish many things,” and, as a result, “it is important to exemplify such language and to provide opportunities for readers to participate in discussions about the imagery in specific works of artistically-created prose” (Zitlow, 2000).

Before students were expected to pick out pieces of quality writing, however, we spent a fair portion of the previous writing unit exploring different literary tools (personification, alliteration, metaphor, simile and so forth). Students were provided with the definitions, examples, time to find examples in text and then, when I felt they had a good grasp of the concepts, I asked students to try their own hand at employing these tools. We also spent a little bit of time discussing grammatical structure (adjuncts, comma splices and other interesting techniques authors use to break the conventions of English and provide more interesting works). However, beyond these brief explorations of language, students had little to go off of as I wanted to see more so what types of things they found interesting in text and whether or not they could recognize some of the tools we had discussed in our previous discussions.

That being said, one of my students with a mild case of dyslexia, read *Love that Dog* by Sharon Creech and picked out the following passage for his Literary Luminary job:

September 27
I don't understand

the poem about
the red wheelbarrow
and the white chickens
and why so much
depends upon
them.

If that is a poem
about the red wheelbarrow
and the white chickens
then any words can be a poem.
You've just to
make
short
lines (Creech, 2001).

This particular student did a very nice job of summing up why he picked this particular passage. He discussed the tool of irony and explained that, because the poem actually uses short lines, it is a poem though, in many respects, this passage does not model what we typically consider to be a poem. He also went on, to my extreme shock, to note that this passage was an allusion to “The Red Wheelbarrow” written by William Carlos Williams.

The previous example is the reason why I think Linda Rief, in her classroom, chooses pieces of young adult literature that are vivid and imaginative and then asks students to “write down passages that really make them see, think, and feel something, to sketch what they see, and then to write out what the passages and sketch bring to mind” (Zitlow, 2000). She does this “because she knows that many students think in visual images, not in words, she helps them use words, voices, and pictures to make sense of their worlds, to extend the literacy spectrum” (Zitlow, 2000). In this quotation, we see how the role of Literary Luminary and Illustrator blend together to create a more complicated

whole, which offers students an alternate way of processing beautifully written work – through illustration.

Zitlow further describes the importance of literary-rich texts when she explains that “participation with works that, because of their excellent features, are considered to be artistic products such as novels, poems, films, paintings, and photographs, can make aspects of the world more vivid. We have the opportunity then, according to Greene, to be awakened from our stock responses to a stance of what she calls throughout her work as ‘wide-awakeness’ (Greene). As a result, we see the world and others in new and different ways. Artistically crafted works, because of their capacity to generate in us a sense of empathy, can help us develop an understanding of those we do not know” (Zitlow, 2000). And, it is this ability to experience different cultures, ways of thinking, people and ideas that makes literature so enticing because, in other words, “the pictures and music in literature, with its nuance and figurative language, make possible certain kinds of experiences, because ideas that become fixed in a public form such as in a literary work, have not only been realized by the creator, they have been stabilized, refined, edited, shared, and have the potential to influence others and be enjoyed by them” (Zitlow, 2000).

That being said, my mentor teacher and I strove to incorporate a variety of genres of literature as well as literature that would help expose students to different cultures, ways of life (utopian novels), beliefs, religions and so forth. While I do not remember the specific books that my students were reading as I had 4 classes of Literature Circles, which all read different books, I do recall that

discussions arose about diversity and, diversity itself arose as a result of having students from different backgrounds work together in their groups.

Vocabulary Enricher

Vocabulary is a means of communication and the building of one's range of vocabulary only enhances his/her ability to communicate effectively with other people. As a result, the Vocabulary Enricher's job is to pick out vocabulary words that were unfamiliar to them, are important to the text, are funny in sound and so forth and write these words down in their composition books. Students are also asked to write the sentence in which the word was found to help them use context clues to guess the word's definition and then they were asked to acquire a dictionary and learn the word's real meaning.

Doing so forces students to look at the way a word is utilized in the sentence to figure out its function (noun, verb, adjective, determiner, pronoun, adverb). Using what information they can from the context of the sentence and what has happened previously in the text, the student can make educated guesses as to the word's meaning, which is an excellent strategy to have when it comes to deciphering harder texts that they might be exposed to (newspaper articles for instance). For example, one of my students who was reading *Love that Dog* wrote the word "splattered" and the sentence that it appeared in, which was, "so much depends upon a blue car splattered with mud speeding down the road" (Creech 2001). He then wrote that he thought it was a verb because it had the -ed ending and that it meant "sprayed." Looking it up in the dictionary, he discovered that it meant "to scatter or fall in or as if in drops" (Merriam-Webster

Dictionary). Having students go through this process like a detective can be rewarding (they used context clues and/or their knowledge of prefixes/suffixes/base words and guessed a definition that was close to the actual definition) or enlightening (they were way off base, but learned something new). That being said, students, at this age and in my particular school boundary, also needed practice utilizing a dictionary and so, having these readily available as a resource in the classroom helped students on their quest for individual knowledge.

This particular role/job gives some educators qualms as they feel that it is segregating vocabulary from language use as a whole and, thus, that students are getting a singular piece of information (the vocabulary word) that does not show its function in the grammatical structure of a sentence. While I can see their point, I also feel that this role was a fitting decision to work into this unit for the population I was serving because, being heavily ELL students, they need instruction that helps them increase their vocabularies of the English language, shows them how to pronounce a word (in the dictionary) and see discrepancies between the word's definition in English as comparative to the same word in their native language, which may or may not have a different connotation. This is a distinction that J. Sterling makes in the article entitled *Helping Students to Learn the Vocabulary that we Teach Them*, when he/she writes that, for ELL students, writing a definition "instead of a translation gives the student the advantage of being able to take a 'fresher' look at a piece of vocabulary, that is not just relating it to a word in their own language which may have subtle differences" (Stirling,

2003).

Similarly, I thought it was important to include vocabulary extraction as a role/job because ELL students need to “be able to use a word appropriately and accurately and students need to know much more about it than just its meaning. Ideally they should learn its spelling, pronunciation, grammatical behavior, associations, collocations, frequency and register” (Sitrling, 2003). That being said, having students use a dictionary helps them discover the spelling, pronunciation and some associations as well as different forms the word can take (plural, past tense and so forth). Also, by asking students to use context clues to guess a word’s definition, students are forced to look at grammatical structure to see what part of speech is being employed and helps them understand its basic function in the sentence. Pronunciation, Stirling notes that, “if a word is for productive use, learners need to know the pronunciation and so should record it,” which was precisely what I had students do in their literature logs (Stirling, 2003).

Connector

The connector’s job, as discussed previously, is to link something that happens in the book to something that has happened in his/her personal life, something that is currently unfolding in the world’s news or another book. These connections are important ones to have students consider because it allows them to personally connect with a book, which helps with student interest level and it also forces children to see the transcendentalism of themes that are perpetually unfolding throughout history and other books – love, greed, jealousy and so forth.

That being said, research suggests that having students write their connections in their respective literature logs “helps bridge the gap between the individual and the curriculum,” which increases his or her personal interest in the curriculum content (Atwell, 1990). Because reading is an inherently “meaning-making process,” we can ask students to do a couple of things to help them make meaningful connections (Strube, 1996). The first way is by simply giving them space in their literature logs to brainstorm what things are transpiring and how they correlate with their individual experiences and prior knowledge. This is important because “brainstorming is a particularly effective strategy for remembering and retrieving information and for quickly getting down on paper a quantity of related ideas. When students brainstorm in their logs they draw on their long-term memory stores in productive and unpredictable ways” (Atwell, 1990). In other words, by giving students adequate time to think about different aspects of their novels, they can make more meaningful connections, which increase their knowledge. This is a technique that is easily used for both fiction and non-fiction text as brainstorming, brain mapping and other graphical organizers can easily be used to generate ideas on themes, concepts, beliefs, facts and so forth.

After students have time to brainstorm and make some meaningful connections, I added in the component of summarizing because it helps students find a way to assimilate new information into their preexisting memory bank. The term “integrating involves the putting together of relevant parts, the building of meaningful connections between new information and prior knowledge.

Summarizing is one way that children assimilate data and make it their own. When writers summarize, they combine information, condense it, select what's important, and discard what is not" (Atwell, 1990). For the aforementioned reason, I implemented several mini-lessons on summarizing and had the students work with simply summarizing their novels in a paragraph at different points in order to work on the skill of integrating relevant information and conveying the important events and connections in a concise paragraph. See "Implementation of Literature Circles into my Classroom" on pages 16 to 26.

The third way to help students make important and lasting connections is to simply allow them the avenue to share and build upon their connections with other group members. Strube writes that, "because each child has had unique experiences, comes from a different environment, and owns individual prior knowledge, each reader has distinctly personal interpretations of language" (Strube, 1996). While this is true, she continues on to say that "the personal relationship between the literature and the reader is forged when the reader identifies with a character, the plot, an object, setting, or illustration, or any other aspect of the book. Literature groups allow students to discuss and share their thoughts, feelings, and opinions once they see reflections of their own lives in the books they're reading" (Strube, 1996). That being said, the sharing of one's personal connections enhances the learning of the entire group for the very reason that we all come from very diverse backgrounds, have lived very different lives and interpret things very differently from anyone else. In essence, we are all individual, but we can collectively share our thoughts and make a piece of

literature more meaningful by simply having the opportunity to talk to one another. And, in the process of sharing one's ideas, students can garner an "appreciation and analysis of the author's craft" as it corresponds to the unfolding discussion (Zitlow, 2000).

A Change in Attitude Towards Reading?

The students, at the culmination of this unit, seemed to look at reading in a new light. From their pre-test scores to their posttest scores, I saw a huge jump in their understanding of some of the main concepts (summarizing, what each role and job required, what the process of re-reading involved, how to use context clues to figure out a word's meaning and so forth) as well as a general interest in reading that was absent before. In terms of raw scores, the class I focused on for purposes of my work sample made an average increase of 4.1 points from their pre-test to their posttest, which is a 20.8 percent increase. This meant that this particular class increased from 42.8 percent on their pre-test to 63.6 percent on their posttest with individual students making up to an 11-point gain. That being said, students were also given scores for their composition books and I did not give any student below a B on his/her book, which tells me that they were in tune with the work load and completed it during the time they were allotted in class.

After talking to the students in an informal discussion on how the unit went, I discovered that the students were really fond of the book talks that my mentor teacher and I did to let them know what the different books were about. As a result, my mentor teacher and I decided to continue doing book talks for the

Scholastic News orders that we received in the classroom, which lead to an increase in sales.

Also, after book talking *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, the students convinced me to do a read-aloud book session every day for the last ten minutes of the period. However, I held off starting the book to a point that I knew we would not be able to finish it within the remainder of the year. Knowing that it would tease some of the students, I was shocked at the number of students who actually checked out copies of the book from the local library to finish reading it over the summer. It just proves that all it takes is the right book and a methodology that does not detract from the purpose of reading in the first place – fun.

Thoughts for Future Implementation:

As with all things we do as teachers, reflection is a huge part of becoming better at what we do. As this was my initial work with Literature Circles, there are many things that I would tweak for future implementation into my classroom.

The first thing I would alter would be my use of the Vocabulary Enricher's job as a method of extracting single vocabulary words from the text and having students sift through different methods to strive and learn the word's definition. Instead, I would discuss and model morphological analysis, which is the internal structure of words. I would model this process to students and help them discover nuances of a word that they were not aware of as well as looking at its role in the larger context of the sentence and piece of literature as a whole.

That being said, in terms of vocabulary extraction, I would also consider

asking students to act out, draw or otherwise internalize vocabulary words in order to help them learn the word's meaning and place it contextually to learn its function. By having students focus on different intelligences (linguistic and bodily-kinesthetic), students are more apt to remember words and their meanings, which helps cement the definitions in their minds and, thus, internalize the information.

The second thing I would look at changing would be the consequences for breaking the rules that each group decided upon at the beginning of the unit. I think it is important to have some sort of consequence in place that will tell students that the rules are important and, if broken, a consequence will be instilled. In the future, I would ask students what they think the consequence should be for breaking rules to give them say in the process and make the rules more personally relevant and important to themselves.

In the end, literature circles are rife with learning opportunities that foster children's multiple ways of learning and expressing themselves. It is a manageable technique for one teacher to implement that offers them a chance to easily differentiate instruction and get all children to process information at their individual levels.

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