

Literature Circles Revisited

Learning from Experience

Upper elementary school through middle school

by Christine Boardman Moen

I began using literature circles in my classroom about 10 years ago. I was excited about this discussion procedure that afforded students the benefits of talking about books in a group setting—something adults also like to do—while at the same time holding students accountable for their individual contributions. In fact, I was so excited about literature circles that I wrote a book about how to use them in the classroom.

Since that book's publication, I've held several positions, moving from a teaching job at a small, urban college-preparatory middle school to an all-boys Catholic high school, and finally to my current position, teaching seventh- and eighth-grade language arts to students in a rural junior-senior high school. Needless to say, I've learned a great deal about using literature circles in each of these settings and with each of these diverse groups of learners. I'd like to share two of the most significant changes I've made in the way I currently use literature circles in my classroom.

Literature Circles at a Glance

Let me first remind you of how literature circles are organized. First, literature circles are student-centered

and directed but teacher-facilitated. In other words, the teacher sets the parameters of the overall literature circle experience, but the students run the operation of the discussion group. Second, literature circles are organized around groups of students but allow for individual assessment. Authentic cooperative learning is based on group activities that allow students to be assessed as individual learners. Consequently, students participate as members of a group, but each is assessed according to his or her individual contribution to the group discussion. Most important, literature circles allow all students to participate in a common literacy experience regardless of reading level or ability. Because text sets of books allow students to choose within a wide range of books grouped around a common theme, students can discuss the topic of bullies whether they've read such diverse books as Lawrence Yep's *Cockroach Cooties* (Hyperion, 2001) or Jerry Spinelli's *Crash* (Knopf, 1996).

Quality Questions

The first change or "improvement" that I made to literature circles involves requiring ALL group members to write a variety of discussion

questions to bring to the group. When I began using literature circles, I became very frustrated with the poor quality of the questions student discussion directors wrote. Questions like "What was the name of the dog in the story?" and "Did the main character love his dog?" drove me nuts! I kept asking myself if literature circles were truly in the best interest of my students if they were only going to discuss trivial facts about the plot and setting of most stories.

What I eventually realized, of course, is that students need to be taught to create meaningful questions, just like they need to be taught any other skill. What I came up with is an introductory activity called "Quality Questions." I give students a list of types of questions like those below, and as a group we write a series of "Quality Questions" for each of these categories based on the fairy tale "The Three Little Pigs."

- **Compare:** Explain how the Big Bad Wolf is similar to "villains" in other fairy tales.
- **Contrast:** Explain how the traditional version of this fairy tale is different from some other version of this tale you may have read or heard.

- **Describe in detail:** Describe the physical appearance of the wolf in detail.
- **Explain why:** Why do you suppose the writer of this tale repeats the lines “Not by the hair of my chinny chin, chin, I will not let you in” and “Then I’ll huff and I’ll puff and I’ll blow your house in”?
- **Examples:** Give examples of the pigs’ cleverness.
- **How do you know if/that . . .:** How do you know that the wolf is determined to gobble up the three pigs?
- **What does it mean when . . .:** What does it mean when a story starts out with the words “Once upon a time . . .”?
- **Opinion/Explain:** Explain if you think this story is supposed to teach the reader or listener a lesson, or if it’s a story for entertainment.

Once students practice writing these types of questions, they are better prepared to write questions that pertain to the book they are reading for their literature circles. It’s also helpful for students to have a copy of the “Quality Questions” categories as they prepare their own questions.

Because I want every one of the students to come to the discussion with questions, I avoid overlapping by having groups decide which members will be responsible for writing questions for a specific number of pages in the book. For example, if a four-person group is supposed to read 100 pages prior to their discussion, two students would write questions based on pages 1–50 while the other two students would write questions for pages 51–100. Another option is for groups to assign each

student types of questions and have him or her write four of each type based on the entire reading assignment. In this way a student would come with four “compare” questions and four “contrast” questions, while another student would write four “why” questions and four “example” questions, and so on.

Fast-Finishers

Another change I made to my literature circles was to provide meaningful activities for “fast-finishing” groups. Although I seldom had students significantly off-task, I did have groups that would finish quite a bit ahead of the others. I discovered that some “fast-finishing” groups did not discuss the book during their discussion time but instead “covered” or “went through” their role sheets quickly. These groups were not confident and/or practiced at discussing books with other students. Other groups finished quickly so they could sit and visit with each other while the rest of the groups continued to discuss.

First, I slowed these groups down and made them more accountable for their comments by tape-recording their discussions. I also had them listen to recordings of other groups’ discussions so they could hear what a good discussion sounded like. Second, I created individual student activity packets that I gave to students to work on while the rest of the groups finished.

Activity packets for “fast-finishing” group members are unique to each book. For example, for Christopher Paul Curtis’ book *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* (Delacorte, 1995), individual student activity packets include some of the following:

- Articles about the church bombing that took place in Birmingham and questions about

Listed below is an article from a past issue of *Book Links* that relates to this feature. For information on how to obtain back issues, see p.3.

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how the information in the newspaper articles related to the story

- Copies of Martin Luther King Jr.’s speeches with related questions
- Photographs from the civil rights movement and instructions on how to write a newspaper story
- Maps, along with instructions to (1) calculate the number of miles the Watsons traveled from Detroit, Michigan, to Birmingham, Alabama, (2) list the states the family drove through, and (3) calculate the amount the family spent on gasoline based on 1963 prices

When the cycle of literature circles is over, students often ask if they or their groups can go through the activity packets. Consequently, the packets not only help with my fast-finishers, but they have also become ready-made end-of-book activities for students who want more.

These are just two of the changes that I made in the way I run literature circles in my classroom. Like our students, we learn from our own experiences and make improvements and adjustments. That’s what teaching and learning are all about!

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