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# PREFACE



*“Learning is not a spectator sport.”*

- Teachers talk too much.
- Telling a student to think is like telling a student to fly.
- There can be no learning without discipline.
- The school that fails to teach thinking fails in everything.
- The student, not the teacher, is the primary agent of learning.
- Nothing is more daunting for a teacher than to get a student to think.
- Teaching is not chiefly about passing out information.
- The best kind of discipline is to engage students in engrossing activities.
- If thinking were easy, there would be more of it.
- The role of the teacher is to uncover the question that an answer hides.
- Thoughtful teachers create thoughtful students.
- Thinking is a skill that has to be practised daily like playing the piano.
- Authentic learning begins when students are challenged with real questions – problems about meaning that demand solutions.
- Students asking students real questions leads to life-long learning.

Dear Colleague,

If you agree with most, or at least some of these statements, you have found kindred spirits. As we shake your hand and get a chair for you, let us explain briefly how this book will help you become a better teacher. Everything in this book is based on the assumption that students, not teachers, are the primary agents in learning. The corollary is that authentic learning is active learning. The consequence is that students become responsible for their own learning.

This book introduces you to a method of student-centred, collaborative learning called Literature Circles. Like their predecessor and complement, Great Book Groups, they have common, immediate goals of developing independent, reflective and critical thinking, and increasing student understanding and enjoyment of literature. Both methods also share the ultimate goal of enabling students to become life-long readers and, as a result, life-long learners.

The lesson plans in this book are grouped around five themes or basic questions:

- Who are your real friends? (Kate DiCamillo, *Because of Winn-Dixie* and Jay Neugeboren, “Luther”)
- When do you need family most? (John Updike, “Separating” and Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*)
- How important is a brother, a sister or a girlfriend in your life? (Carson McCullers, “Sucker”, Jean Stafford, “Bad Characters”, William Faulkner, “Two Soldiers” and Leo Tolstoy, “The Two Brothers”)
- How do true leaders inspire followers while false leaders deceive theirs? (George Orwell, *Animal Farm* and C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*)
- Is technology as much a curse as a blessing? (Isaac Asimov, “Robbie” and Ray Bradbury, “The Veldt”)

Finally, whenever available, we use film versions of novels and stories to make them more accessible to today’s students, who are so visually conditioned. Since a film is itself the interpretation of the screenwriter, this book explains how to bring some of these stories to life through comparison/contrast discussion and writing. Together, may we continue to help our students educate their imaginations. Through active and close reading, and viewing film with a critical mind, we may also enable them to become life-long learners.

Sincerely,  
Victor and Marc Moeller

# THE WHAT, WHY AND HOW OF LITERATURE CIRCLES

# 1



*“Our closely knit team of teachers has been developing one version of literature circles for almost fifteen years ... Do we think our model is better? Certainly not. We are genuinely impressed by the diverse ways that other teachers around the country have created and supported literature discussion groups.” (Daniels, 2002)*

The first time I saw Harvey Daniels speak was in a large conference room. His discussion centred on the nature of reading and how it should develop a sense of the human condition. The teachers I remember most are those who had the ability and courage to tap into the things that really move us: love, relationships, fears, pain, hopes and dreams. Some teachers, perhaps subconsciously, seem to have been taught to restrict, ignore or dismiss the human element in their classrooms. I agree strongly with Daniels’s position on the relationship between reading and the human spirit, “We’ve asked kids to bottle up their responses, and in doing so we have blocked the pathway that leads upward from responding to analysing and evaluating” (Daniels, 1994, p. 9). With mock humour and irony, Daniels correctly pointed out that presently, “traditional school reading programs are virtually designed to ensure that kids never voluntarily pick up a book once they graduate” (p. 11.)

My father and I regard ourselves among those teachers who have followed the 12 principles of Literature Circles for several years while making their own refinements and innovations. Literature Circles and Great Book Groups have so much in common that some teachers regard them as a prelude to Great Book Groups while others see them as complementary and still others regard them as an alternative method of engaging all students, *whatever their ability*, in authentic, active learning. However, all teachers agree that both methods, although distinctly different, have common immediate goals: to develop independent and critical thinking and to increase student understanding and enjoyment of literature. Both methods also share the goal of enabling students to become lifelong readers and, as a result, lifelong learners.

## TWELVE PRINCIPLES



Two key concepts associated with Literature Circles are independent reading and collaborative learning, both first developed by Becky Abraham Searle. Today her ideas, like those of Harvey Daniels, are being developed and adapted with great enthusiasm. So what are the characteristics of a Literature Circle? Here is our version of the Twelve Principles that determine and guide these small-group discussions:

- **First**, students choose their own reading.
- **Second**, small, temporary groups (six to eight students) are formed based on book choice.
- **Third**, different groups read different books.
- **Fourth**, groups meet for discussion on a regular, predictable schedule.
- **Fifth**, group members use written notes to guide both their reading and discussion.
- **Sixth**, discussion questions come from the students, not teachers or textbooks.
- **Seventh**, group meetings strive to become open, natural conversations about books.
- **Eighth**, students take on a rotating assortment of role tasks.
- **Ninth**, the teacher does not lead or participate in group discussions, but acts as a facilitator and observer.
- **Tenth**, evaluation is by teacher observation and student self-evaluation.
- **Eleventh**, a spirit of fun about reading pervades the room.
- **Twelfth**, when books are finished, readers share with their classmates and then new groups form around new reading choices.

Several of these principles need some elaboration. On the **first** principle of letting children choose their own reading, some veteran English teachers may gasp. However, I am not old enough to gasp but agree with Daniels's contention that "you absolutely cannot fall in love with a book that someone stuffs down your throat" (Daniels, 1994, p. 19). In my classroom, students are allowed to choose from the books that we have available or are easily obtainable, and meet in groups of six to eight with those who have chosen the same book.

The **second** principle, that groups form around book choice, is also vital. I want to group kids the way they would naturally group themselves – out of a common interest. I also realise that I may start off the class with every student picking one book to read for themselves on their own with a regularly scheduled Friday for sustained silent reading, just to get them into the mode of reading for pleasure on their own. Later, I get kids into Literature Circles with a limited list of books from which they can choose and want to read in a group setting. While there is an initial challenge in letting kids choosing their own books and groups, this difficulty can soon be overcome by trial-and-error and common sense.

The **third** principle, allowing kids to choose their books, is important for two reasons. Firstly, it gives them the opportunity to assign reading to themselves as adults do. By giving students the opportunity of setting up their own readings they take ownership. With practice and repetition it may continue even after they leave school. Secondly, choice is an integral part of literate behaviour. Being forced to read too often results in not reading at all – even when one has the

some students can handle the subtleties of a story like John Updike's "Separating", while others would be mystified. On the other hand, some students may find a story like *Because of Winn-Dixie* not much of a challenge because its meaning is pretty transparent. But what can be done when students choose a book that is too hard or too easy for them? Daniels has two suggestions: the teacher has a private reading conference with the student to select another book or to provide the help (an aide, peer helper or parent to read parts aloud, or even getting the audiobook, if possible) necessary for the student to achieve enough understanding to be able to function in their group (p. 183).

## THE FUNCTION OF ROLE SHEETS IN DISCUSSION



For many teachers who have implemented Literature Circles, five key roles are required for success: Discussion Coleaders, Characters Captain, Passage Master, Wordsmith and Connector. The Movie Critic's role is optional, of course, depending on the availability of a film version of the story and teacher choice. To illustrate the importance and function of the first five roles, I spend two days modelling each task on a short selection (for example, Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken" or a superb one-page story by William Spencer, "Bethgelert") that the entire class reads to make sure students understand what they will be asked to do in their own groups (pp. 153–157).

The job of the **Discussion Coleaders** is to develop a list of 10 questions for group discussion about the section of the book that has been read prior to their meeting. It is vital that the teacher explains, illustrates and tests student's understanding about the difference between the three kinds of questions: factual, interpretive and evaluation. Unless the Discussion Coleaders understand that they are being asked to write and lead **interpretive** questions, there can be *no increase* in understanding of the reading. Discussion dead-ends when factual questions are raised since they have but one correct answer. Questions of evaluation, those based on personal experience or values, are raised by the Connector, not the Discussion Coleaders.

We have also discovered that coleaders are preferable to a single leader because two students provide more brain power to write good prepared questions, more listening power to ask related spontaneous follow-ups, and more attention power to invite everyone to participate (more or less equally) by calling on them by name and by keeping track on a seating chart. Most importantly, *coleaders ask only questions during discussion*. They do not comment on or judge group responses to avoid turning discussion into an argument or a debate.

The **Characters Captain** lists the major characters in the story, gives a brief description of each one's personality and explains their relationship to the other characters in the story.

The job of the **Passage Master** is to locate two or three key passages of the text that the person thinks the group would like to hear read aloud. The idea here is to help people remember some interesting, powerful, funny, puzzling or important section or sections of the text. The Passage Master's role also involves reading the passage aloud to the group, explaining why it was chosen and what the group should look for related to it as the reading progresses (p. 78.)

Each group should also have a **Wordsmith** who selects in advance several especially important words that appeared in the reading. These words may be puzzling or unfamiliar, or familiar words that stand out because they are often repeated, used in an unusual way or key

# PREPARING STUDENTS TO PARTICIPATE IN LITERATURE CIRCLES: SIX ROLE SHEETS



## LESSON PLAN 1



1.	Focus:	When was the last time you discussed, really discussed, a book or movie with a friend? Why did you want to talk to someone about that book or movie? (Journal or Response Log)
2.	Objective:	to understand the nature and requirements of six roles that participants share in small group discussions
3.	Purpose:	to prepare students for six different role tasks that they will be asked to perform at different moments during discussion when they gather for a scheduled group meeting
4.	Input and Modelling:	<p>First reading (oral): “The Fox and the Crow”, then Aesop and now James Thurber, <i>Fables for Our Time</i>.</p> <p>Second reading (silent): students make notations on whatever is important, whatever they don’t understand, whatever they like or dislike, agree or disagree with, and on whatever is related – one part of the story to another (connections).</p>
5.	Checking for Understanding:	Review directions on each of the six roles: Characters Master, Discussion Coleaders, Passage Master, Wordsmith, Connector and Movie Critic (when needed).
6.	Guided Practice:	Divide the class into six small groups and assign each group one of the six tasks.
7.	Closure:	Review each group’s work on each of the six roles. Extol good models and make suggestions for those that need improvement.



Textual analysis is a detailed examination of a particular passage in which you try to determine the author's meaning line by line and sometimes word by word. This technique is a good way to get into a reading when the group has not read well enough to participate in an interpretive discussion. In addition to being a remedial device, when teacher and/or student coleaders use textual analysis, they model what should be happening during the first and second readings. Finally, textual analysis is also effective even when the group is doing well in discussion; in this situation, textual analysis builds on ideas already expressed to draw out more meaning from specific passages that help to resolve the basic question.

Textual analysis involves four steps in this order:

1. **Select a passage** that you want to examine closely, and have a group participant read it aloud. Oral reading is not only an important aid to understanding, it's also an indicator of a student's level of comprehension of what they are reading.
2. **Identify the speaker of the passage**, the narrator. It may be the author speaking directly to you, a fictional narrator, an anonymous narrator or a character speaking to another character.
3. **Identify the context of the passage.** If you have chosen a passage other than the beginning or the conclusion of the story, try to get a rough idea of where you are in the selection. In short, ask questions about what happened just prior to the passage and what happened just after it.
4. **Review the passage line by line and even key words.** This step is the heart of textual analysis and the most important. Go over the difficult passage, line by line, freely asking questions of fact or of interpretation about the meaning of words, phrases and sentences about which you are uncertain. Freely turn to other sections of the reading that you think are related to the passage being explored. After you have reviewed the entire passage, return to your basic question by restating or rephrasing it, and then continue the discussion.



# THE LION, THE WITCH AND THE WARDROBE



## LESSON PLAN 13



1.	Focus:	Are there any leaders in your life? If so, is any one leader more important than another? Why? How can you tell the difference between a true and a phony leader? (Journal or Response Log)
2.	Objective:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to understand the nature and requirements of six role sheets on this story that participants will share in their small-group discussions</li> <li>to review the Three Kinds of Questions and Qualities of Good Discussion Questions</li> </ul>
3.	Purpose:	to prepare students for small-group discussion
4.	Input and Modelling:	Plot-Check Quiz on Three Kinds of Questions and Exercise on the Qualities of Good Questions on the novel
5.	Checking for Understanding:	review the Plot-Check Quiz and the Exercise on Qualities of Good Questions
6.	Guided Practice:	review the content of each of the six role sheets: Characters Captain, Discussion Coleaders, Passage Master, Wordsmith, Movie Critic and Connector
7.	Closure:	extol good examples and make suggestions for those that need improvement

Source: Lewis, C. S. (2002). *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. New York: HarperCollins.

Film: Disney & Walden Media, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, 2005, 135 minutes.

Internet: <http://www.narnia.com> and <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0363771/>

## COLEADER DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: PREPARED QUESTIONS



1. Why does the author have Aslan overcome the White Witch by sacrificing his own life to save Edmund's?
2. Why does Lewis make the White Witch a nonhuman who is "bad all through"? (p. 88)
3. Why does the narrator tell us that Edmund is not really bad? (p. 96)
4. After his private meeting with Edmund, why does Aslan tell Peter, Susan and Lucy "there is no need to talk to him about what is past"? (p. 153)
5. Does Aslan accept the Queen's bargain to trade his life for Edmund's because he had no other option? (p. 158)
6. How is Aslan able to overcome death and return to life? (pp. 178-179)
7. After Edmund's near-fatal wound, what does Aslan mean when he asks Lucy, "Must more people die for Edmund?" (p. 197)
8. Why does the reader know, while Edmund doesn't, that Aslan exchanged his life for Edmund's? (p. 197)
9. Why does Aslan evoke such different feelings in each of the Pevensie children? (p. 74: Why a feeling of "mysterious horror" in Edmund?)
10. What does Mr Beaver mean when he says Aslan "isn't safe but he's good"? (p. 86)
11. How can Aslan be "good and terrible at the same time"? (p. 140)

## PASSAGE MASTER



Deep Magic: Chapter 15 (pp. 156, 170, 178, 179).

## WORDSMITH



The average reader will not likely have difficulty with Lewis's vocabulary since his narrator is conscious that his audience is children. However, there are some exotic animals and English references that would have to be defined:

*centaur* (p. 199)

*Minotaurs* (p. 172)

*dungeons* (p. 187)

*satyr* (p. 125)

*dwarf* (p. 32)

*Spectres* (p. 172)

*faun* (chapter 2)

*Turkish Delight* (p. 40)