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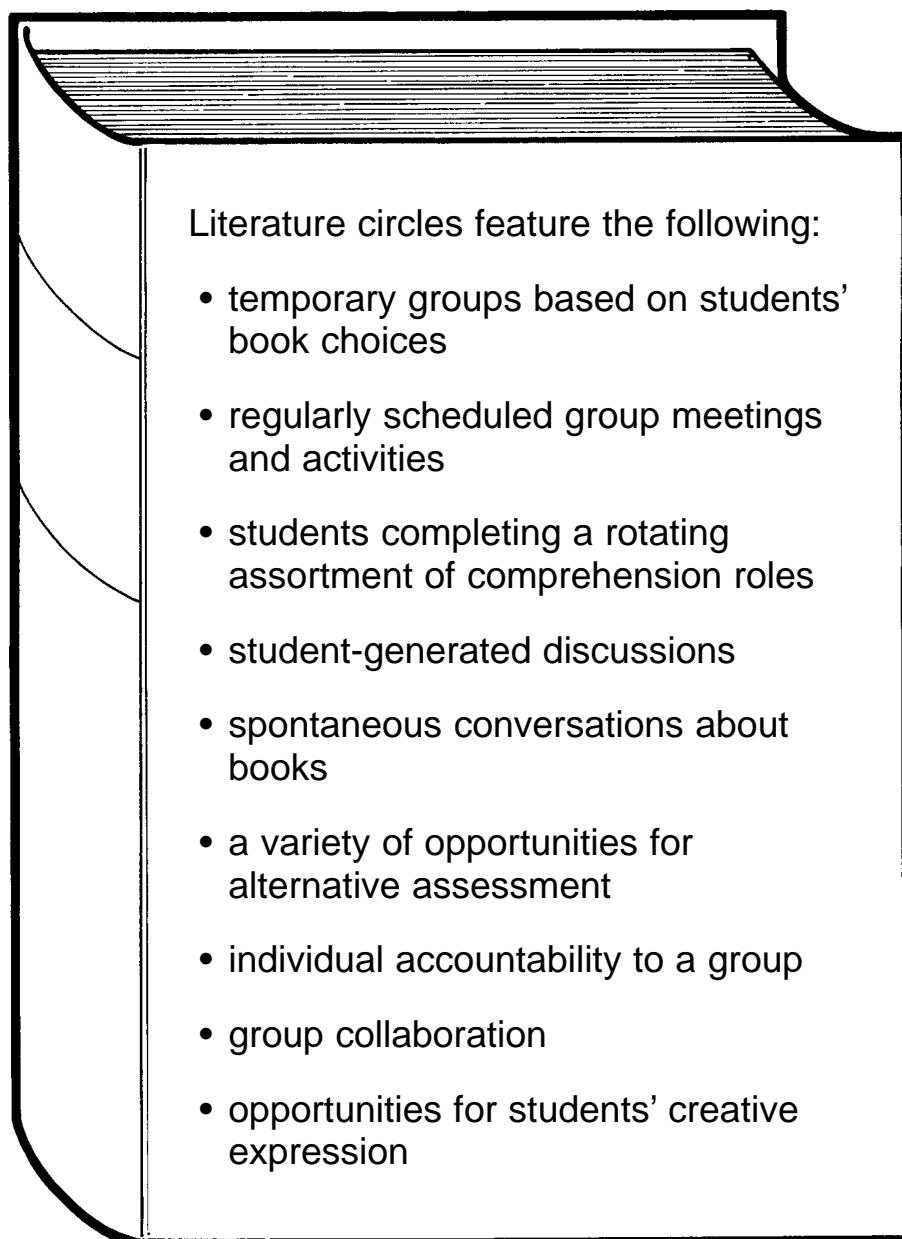
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Introduction

Are you frustrated trying to match student interest with the range of reading skills and ability levels in your class? Do your students lack responsibility and ownership of their learning? Are you always looking for new ways to help students apply reading comprehension skills? Do your students need to become independent critical thinkers and enthusiastic about reading? An effective method of addressing all of these issues is to make use of literature circles.

Literature circles are student-led book groups that develop students' ownership and responsibility for their learning. Teachers can facilitate the learning by becoming a contributing member of the group and/or an outside observer that guides the process.





What Does Research Say?

Below are some examples of what researchers say about literature circles.

Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom by Harvey Daniels (1994)

- ‘If kids never practice digging big ideas out of text themselves and always have teachers doing it for them, how can they ever achieve literary and intellectual independence?’
- ‘You can have a very diverse class of kids, with widely mixed ability levels, assorted cultural and ethnic identities, even lots of mainstreamed special education children, and still have an exciting, challenging, orderly, and caring atmosphere for everyone.’

Methods that Matter: Six Structures for Best Practice Classrooms by Harvey Daniels and Marilyn Bizar (1998)

- ‘Students already get plenty of dog-eat-dog contention in school; now they need more chances to work in small teams with common purposes—just like adults do everyday, in their offices, law firms, gas stations, departments, insurance agencies, grocery stores, city councils, and ad agencies.’

Tell Me: Children, Reading, and Talk by Aidan Chambers (1996)

- ‘Reducing literary study to a kind of multiple choice exercise with the teacher as the final answer leads kids to distrust their own experiences of the text and they report as their own the kind of responses they sense the teacher wants to hear.’

Literature Study Circles in a Multicultural Classroom by K.D. Samway and Gail Whang (1996)

- ‘If there is anything we have learned from the students’ evaluations of literature study circles, it is that they all prize discussions. To deny a student access to these rich times of sharing because of a lack of fluency as a reader is counterproductive.’

Invitations: Changing as Teachers and Learners K–12 by Regie Routman (1991)

- ‘Perhaps most significant, literature has the power to help develop students as critical readers, writers, and thinkers. As adults, these are the people who read with questions in mind, substantiate their opinions, take an intelligent stand on an issue, read the newspaper analytically, question politicians’ jargon . . .’





What Do Teachers Say?

Below is a list of questions that teachers frequently ask about literature circles.

1. Some of my students still need other skills. How do I work that in?

Literature circles are only one part of a complete reading program. Like any other reading program, time is needed for skill development. As illustrated on the Sample Lesson Schedule (page 16), components of literature circles can be incorporated into the daily schedule on alternate days. The other days can be used for skill development, covering specific proficiency strands, etc. Literature circles are very flexible and can accommodate many different types of schedules.

2. How do I accommodate for various levels within my class?

This will depend on the ability range of your students and the type of support that is needed. Literature circles can consist of heterogeneous or homogeneous groupings. Homogeneous groups with students of lower ability may require more teacher direction, just as with any immature heterogeneous group. Homogeneous groups provide great modelling from more capable students to the student that is more challenged in reading. Many of the roles (see pages 76–78) can be modified, done orally or completed with the use of technology.

Even though the text may be difficult to read, students may still be able to understand the story line and engage in discussion groups, further exposing them to higher-level thinking skills. Having the passages on a tape recorder or allowing a peer or parent to read books, chapters or specific reading assignments aloud to a student are other options. These passages can also be previewed or reviewed as needed. Alternate days in the schedule could be used to focus on specific skill development of the lower-level readers.

3. How do I assess students in literature circles?

Before deciding on an assessment tool, it is always a good idea to know what is being assessed. Is the student's enjoyment of reading, reading fluency or overall reading comprehension being assessed? All of these can be done in various ways.

Running records can be done on individual students during group times to assess fluency, accuracy and comprehension. Anecdotal records can be kept to note student participation in group projects and discussion. The roles that are provided run the range of higher-level thinking skills and can easily be used to assess a student's understanding of the text.

4. We are expected to meet district and state standards (i.e., proficiency tests, district benchmarks, etc.). How do I know I will be meeting those objectives?

As mentioned above, the roles and classroom activities encompass a range of critical thinking skills. Specific skills are taught on alternating days or whatever schedule is determined to best fit the needs of the students. Because of the combination of direct skill instruction, higher-level skill activities and cooperative learning (as well as culminating activities and curriculum integration), the expectations and standards of most districts and states are covered.



The Progression of Literature Circle Lessons

The following is a framework for preparing students to run independent groups. The progression of each step is dependent on the skill, ability and maturity of the class, as well as the teacher's willingness to be a facilitator or coach instead of a dispenser of information.

Step 1: Class Read Aloud

- A. Books – The teacher selects one title to be read by the entire class. The teacher controls the pace that the students move through the book. Titles can be selected in conjunction with a thematic unit, content area studies, genre, author study etc.
- B. Groups – The class functions as one literature circle. The teacher's role is to model the appropriate expectations, behaviour, participation and responsibility.
- C. Roles – At this level, key roles are introduced and taught. The entire class is assigned the same role at the same time over the same reading selection. As a group, students share the role with the group while the teacher models and critiques their efforts. A suggested progression of roles would be: 1) Illustrator, 2) Sequencer, 3) Read-Aloud Master, 4) Scene Setter, 5) Discussion Leader, 6) Connection Maker and 7) Summariser. The order of the remaining roles can be based on the skill the teacher needs to emphasise, for example using Commentator to focus on fact and opinion concepts.

Step 2: Small Groups (Same Book)

- A. Books – Each group is assigned the same book. The teacher controls the pace in which all groups move through the book. The teacher may want to offer a variety of books and allow for the class to vote on which is used for each of the small groups. Students change groups each time a new book is studied.
- B. Groups – Each group has the responsibility as modelled in the large group. The teacher monitors group progress and advises the groups on specific concerns.
- C. Roles – Each group member is assigned a different role for predetermined sections in the book. When groups meet, each member is responsible for sharing his or her work. It is suggested that the roles used in the first round of small groups be the same as those introduced in the Class Read Aloud.





The Progression of Literature Circle Lessons *(cont.)*

Step 3: Small Groups (Different Books Assigned)

- A. Books – Each group is assigned a different book by the teacher. Initially the teacher may opt to create groups by ability level for management concerns, but later it is important to move into heterogeneous grouping.
- B. Groups – Cooperatively, each group is self-paced. The teacher continues to guide them through the process, take anecdotal records, check assignments and offer suggestions to the group. The groups become more independent in conducting the discussion and sharing of roles. The teacher introduces the assignment calendar (page 20) as a means to guide students to plan their reading and roles weekly.
- C. Roles – As in the previous grouping, the students take on different roles for each predetermined section of the book. The choice of roles can be expanded to meet curriculum objectives of the teacher. (*Note:* New roles should be introduced and modelled to the whole class before adding them as options in the assignments for group members.)

Step 4: Independent Groups – Student Book Choice/Assignment Calendars (The Ultimate Goal)

This is the last step in group autonomy. At this point, students have learned the process and expectations of literature circles and have been successful. Students are expected to take ownership and control of their own learning. (*Note:* There may be only one or two groups in a class that are ready for this step. It may even be more manageable for the teacher to start off with only one group taking on this responsibility.)

- A. Books – The teacher presents a variety of books and allows the students to select the top three that they would like to read. The teacher forms the groups based on student choices. This allows for some teacher control. Books offered can vary in difficulty and length while still focusing on a theme, content area, genre etc.
- B. Groups – Groups remain self-paced by using the assignment calendar and following the daily and weekly routines.
- C. Roles – Group members are responsible for gathering, assigning and completing roles according to teacher expectations.

