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## Discussion and literature circle study in the content area classroom

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## Discussion and literature circle study in the content area classroom

### Abstract

The purpose of this project is to train content area teachers in the use of literature circles for the content area. A workshop format is used in order to accommodate staff schedules and to include the maximum number of participants possible. The audience for the workshop will be 20-25 secondary content area teachers. A review of the literature concerning content reading, discussion, and literature circles confirmed that the implementation of literature circles would have a positive effect on the content area classroom. Literature circles are an effective method for all disciplines.

**Discussion and Literature Circle Study**  
**in the**  
**Content Area Classroom**

**A Graduate Project**

**Submitted to the**

**Division of Reading and Language Arts**  
**Department of Curriculum and Instruction**

**in Partial Fulfillment**

**of the Requirements for the Degree**

**Master of Arts in Reading Education**

**UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA**

**by**

**Deborah L. Meade**

**August 3, 2001**

This Project by: Deborah L. Meade

Titled: Discussion and Literature Circle Study in the Content Area Classroom

has been approved as meeting the research requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts  
in Reading Education.

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## Abstract

The purpose of this project is to train content area teachers in the use of literature circles for the content area. A workshop format is used in order to accommodate staff schedules and to include the maximum number of participants possible. The audience for the workshop will be 20-25 secondary content area teachers. A review of the literature concerning content reading, discussion, and literature circles confirmed that the implementation of literature circles would have a positive effect on the content area classroom. Literature circles are an effective method for all disciplines.

## Introduction and Literature Review

In a recent staff meeting, content area teachers asked what they could do to help their students better understand texts used in their classrooms. Their frustration with a growing number of students who appear to be unable to read for information or comprehend texts at grade level was evident. I offered some basic strategies such as KWL and the use of graphic organizers to assist students, but still more needed to be done to help students grasp a more personal understanding of printed material. I have studied the use of literature circles and implemented them over the past two years into my classroom. I first became interested in literature circles as a way to help ESL students become more actively involved in the classroom. What I discovered is that literature circles benefit all students. My own experience resulted in students who were actively engaged in learning and eager to participate in reading activities. Literature circles motivated my students by allowing them a choice in what they read and a say in how learning took place in the classroom.

This project addresses the use of discussion and literature circles in the middle school content classroom. Research has shown that through the use of literature circles and discussion, students will develop a deeper understanding of printed material in the content area when given the benefits of choice in the materials they read and a voice in what is learned in the classroom (Daniels, 1994; Hill, Johnson, & Noe, 1995; Samway & Whang, 1991). The attached project is a workshop designed to teach content area teachers how to improve students' involvement and understanding of content texts and both fiction and nonfiction trade books used in the content classroom. The workshop

instructs the classroom teacher in ways to involve students more in text by teaching discussion skills and implementing literature circles into the curriculum.

Content literacy is defined as the ability to use reading, writing, speaking and listening for the acquisition of new content in a given discipline (Alverman & Phelps, 1998). It is an area with which many secondary students struggle, and it is not uncommon to find students who are unable to gather information from the assigned texts.

"Once students reach the middle level, they are expected to make the leap from learning to read via the familiar topics and story format of basal readers to reading to obtain information from content area texts that present new information organized in entirely different ways. Instruction shifts from teaching students the process of reading to focusing on the content of the text." (Barton, 1997, p. 23).

However, students are given little if any instruction to make the shift from a greater focus on learning to read to a greater focus on reading to learn. Typical lessons in a content area classroom are teacher-centered and allow little time for students to construct meaning through social interaction with peers (Paratore & McCormack, 1997). "If students learn anything, they learn that they don't have to read course material because there are alternative routes to acquiring the information. The end result is passive reading or no reading at all"(Vacca & Vacca, 1999, p. 173). Frustrated with students' lack of content literacy skills, many teachers resort to giving students the information orally. In a John Goodlad (as cited in Vacca & Vacca) study, he found that most classrooms consist of a teacher positioned at the front of the room feeding information to the students. Teachers contribute more talk time than students by as much as a three-to-one ratio (Vacca



& Vacca). These teacher-centered lessons continue despite evidence that suggests that students need opportunities to engage in talk in order to become competent language learners as well as being able to construct meaning from a text ( Cazden, 1988; Cullinan, 1993).

It is vital that teachers restructure their classrooms to increase student participation and effort so that students are actively engaged in what is going on in the classroom. Teachers who continue with traditional methods and structure will find the majority of their students becoming non-participants in the classroom. By linking talking to reading and writing, the classroom teacher can increase student participation and learning. Talk is a powerful learning tool for the secondary student. It serves as a connector to help the students make the association between the printed material and learning. It fulfills the students' need to have power and control over their own learning, and it allows them to explore and clarify new ideas (Vacca & Vacca, 1999). In asking students to share responses only with the teacher, we, as teachers, have prevented them from taking a deeper look at text. Students will not make the step of analyzing and evaluating what they read unless we allow them to verbally discuss texts with other students. They need to talk to become actively engaged. Students need to be taught how to "express, effuse, emote, think, and weigh" throughout the reading process (Daniels, 1994, p. 9). A multicase study involving adolescents at five sites across the United States showed that students perceive discussions as helping them understand what they read, and allowing them to test their own ideas while learning to be respectful of others (Alverman, Dillon & O'Brien, 1996). By providing them with the skills they need to

participate in effective discussions and modeling behaviors present in literature study circles, students can become more active participants in the learning process.

Students will be more likely to make the learning their own when allowed to include their own talk (Vacca & Vacca, 1999). Making the classroom a response-centered environment benefits learners greatly. It places a high value on what they think and feel in relation to what they are reading. It enriches and extends their own personal responses to the text (Vacca & Vacca). Teachers serve as facilitators in a response-centered classroom, offering help and guidance on an as-needed basis. The students are the ones who lead the discussion and determine the direction it is to take. A response-centered curriculum allows students to explore, discuss and analyze the text through personal response first so that they may gain a deeper understanding of the text (Daniels, 1994). Morgan & Richardson (2000) recommend using communication to foster thinking and learning in content subjects. Writers, speakers, readers and listeners all are engaged in a mutual process aimed at creating understanding of the text. Through writing, students learn how writing works and can better understand what authors do (Rasinski & Padak, 2000). Opportunities to speak about literature with their peers will strengthen communication skills needed in the work world. Readers who are provided a variety of texts with frequent opportunities for reading are more likely to become life-long readers and build background knowledge to help them become better readers and writers (Daniels, 1994; Harris & Sipay, 1985). Finally, by listening to different viewpoints, students can gain a varied and deeper insight into a topic (Morgan & Richardson, 2000).

By first teaching and modeling discussion skills, students will be more prepared to participate in literature circle discussions. Current research suggests that providing

students with opportunities to develop discussion skills will lead to higher level reading skills (Alverman, Dillon, & O'Brien, 1987 ; Paratore & McCormack, 1997). The implementation of discussion webs prior to literature study circles can help students gain necessary discussion skills that are beneficial to literature circles. A discussion web is a strategy that creates a framework for students to explore a text and consider other perspectives before drawing conclusions about the material (Vacca & Vacca, 1999). The discussion web uses cooperative learning principles that follow a think-pair-share discussion cycle and uses a graphic display to scaffold students' thinking. The instructor prepares students for reading by activating prior knowledge through a whole class discussion. Students then read the selection and work to generate pro and con response to the questions. The teacher then divides the class into teams of four to compare responses in the group. The main goal of the four-member team is to draw a conclusion based on their discussion of the web (Vacca & Vacca). Vacca and Vacca report a high level of participation in discussion web lessons, and suggest that the strategy works well for both informational and narrative texts.

Alverman and Phelps (1998) also recommend discussion webs. Discussion webs provide students with the opportunity to consider other viewpoints. In contrast to whole class discussions where often a few students monopolize the discussion, webs allow all students to expand their understanding of the text. It also provides a more comfortable setting for ESL students by placing them in a small group and giving all students more of an opportunity to participate. The paired work and small group opportunities allow for more students to participate than in more traditional whole-class recitation. Discussion webs help to keep the discussion focused and they ensure that students will support their

words with relevant information from the text rather than relying on personal opinions and emotional appeals. (Alverman & Phelps). The purpose of these discussions should be to encourage students to engage in critical reading skills and discussions (Vacca & Vacca, 1999). It allows them to solve problems, clarify details and values, explore issues and support their positions with logic and information from the text. There are many benefits to be gained in allowing students to participate in these discussion opportunities. Students can gain a deeper insight into a topic, they learn to respect other viewpoints, take turns, disagree in a respectful manner, and paraphrase material. Discussions can improve vocabulary and enhance comprehension as the student becomes engaged with the text (Morgan & Richardson, 2000). Discussion webs will be used to help teach valuable discussion skills prior to the implementation of literature circles. Once students have had opportunities to improve their abilities to participate in discussions, they will need further direction in order to be productive members of a literature circle discussion. Modeling the procedure will clarify teacher expectations of what a literature circle discussion should look like (Paratore & McCormack, 1997).

Literature circles are discussion groups that allow students to meet regularly to talk about a text (Hill, Johnson, & Noe, 1995). They usually involve three to six students of varying abilities who come together temporarily to discuss a common text and help each other learn. The group determines what will be read and each member has a specific responsibility in the group (Daniels, 1994). Choice, ownership and empowerment are the main ingredients in developing responsibility. Literature circles require that students take responsibility for their own learning and give them the power to discover knowledge on their own (Scott, 1994). Through literature circle discussions, students learn reading

strategies, they learn about various genres, they learn to collaborate to construct meaning, and they learn to value the responses of others. But most important to content teachers, they learn to use texts to get information that will help them construct meaning (Cullinan, 1993). Content area teachers may create greater opportunities for understanding by incorporating literature into the content areas. The use of literature will increase students' exposure to the language of the discipline, and will allow readers to experience other times, places, people and cultures. Trade books are often more contemporary than textbooks, as textbooks may be several years in development with content that may be outdated by the time it reaches the classroom. Trade books go beyond the facts and include characters, settings, and plots that help readers to experience the content in a personal way. This can be a powerful catalyst for critical analysis because the content becomes real for the learner and motivates him or her to delve deeper into the subject. Finally, literature is usually presented in a more appealing way and may encourage readers to seek other reading experiences (Alverman & Phelps, 1998).

There are several benefits to implementing literature circles into the classroom. Initially, literature circles promote a love for literature and positive attitudes toward reading. Certainly the way students are asked to respond to texts influences their attitudes about reading (Hill, et al., 1995). Next, literature circles reflect a constructivist, child-centered model of literacy. A constructivist theory emphasizes learning as a social process and supports the idea that reading and writing processes develop through interaction with peers (Paratore & McCormack, 1997). Students gain an understanding of the text that extends beyond the surface of the text. They become more engaged in learning. One study by Knoeller (1994) suggests that a higher number of students will

actively participate when learning situations are presented in a student-led format. Also, literature circles encourage extensive and intensive reading. Students need time to read both extensively (widely) and intensively (in a more personal way) to broaden their reading experience. Literature circles give students the opportunity to read about, discuss, and gain a better understanding of texts and issues (Samway, Whang, Cade, Gamil, Lubandina & Phommachanh, 1991). Literature circles invite natural discussions that lead to student inquiry and critical thinking. Students make comparisons to other texts, initiate and build on discussion topics, study literary elements, and make connections to their own lives. They are motivated to learn and become active learners in the classroom (Samway & Whang, 1996). In addition, literature circles support diverse responses to texts. Traditional reading instruction leaned more toward the efferent (skills and information) stance, but ignore a more aesthetic stance which involves the reader's personal involvement with a text. Literature circles allow for both types of response (Hill, et al.). Since there is no ability grouping, literature circles promote an acceptance of all abilities and responses within the group (Scott, 1994). Research indicates that cooperative learning approaches lead to higher academic achievement, better relationships among students, and improved attitudes toward subjects studied (Johnson & Johnson, 1994; Daniels, 1994). Further, literature circles provide choice and encourage responsibility. Teachers who include choice in their programs report improved student involvement and improved attitudes towards reading (Atwell 1987; Swift, 1993). Brian Cambourne (1988) emphasizes that when students feel ownership as a result of choice, responsibility for learning often follows. Next, literature circles expose readers to literature from multiple perspectives. Reading books about a variety of topics allows

students to experience other cultures, times and perspectives. The text and discussion work together to draw readers into the lives, times and experiences of the characters and events. (Samway & Whang, 1996). Finally, literature circles nurture reflection and self-evaluation. Students are given the opportunity to self-monitor and reflect which are characteristics of a good reader. "Because self-monitoring is such a key ingredient in the reading process, it only makes sense that participants in literature circles are regularly asked to write and talk evaluatively about their own goals, roles, and performances in literature circles" (Daniels 1994, p. 27). Wilson & Jan (1993) confirm that students who are given opportunities to assess their own learning behaviors become better at establishing goals to improve their learning. Literature circles can be used in any classroom, from kindergarten through adult groups. They can be done in any subject area and in any region of the country (Daniels 1994).

### Methodology:

I currently teach in a district in a middle school with levels six, seven and eight. The student population is primarily white with a growing Hispanic population. There is no reading support for teachers other than the special education staff who may offer assistance for lower level learners. Very few of the teachers have training in reading instruction. The building does have an ESL associate to help with instructional support and translating as needed. This project started at the request of content area teachers to be trained to assist students in their content area reading. Since there are no reading specialists identified in the district, I agreed to take on the project.

I directed the research for this project towards two topics: content area reading and literature circle discussions. I began my search with the materials I had already collected in research for my own implementation of literature circles. I then conducted an ERIC search to locate additional references to support the use of literature circles in the content area classroom. Some of the materials came from my personal library, but the majority of the references were gathered from the Rod Library at the University of Northern Iowa. My research into the content area supported the idea that content area teachers could benefit from direction in how to help students become more engaged in their classroom.

The primary focus for the workshop was the implementation of literature circles in the content area classroom. One of my goals for the workshop was to provide teachers with a toolbox for implementing literature circles into the classroom. I used a variety of



sources to create artifacts that could be used either in the workshop presentation or included in handouts for the participants. I believe that Daniel's (1994) role sheets are a valuable tool, but they needed to be revised for content disciplines in order to approach non-fiction and content texts within the literature circle. I revised the role sheets to include the roles of Map Maker and Historical Reporter to create a set of role sheets for use by the content teacher (see Figure 1 for a list of roles and their descriptions). In the course of implementing literature circles into my own classroom, I discovered the importance of pre-teaching discussion skills prior to implementing literature circle discussions and decided to include those in my workshop. I included this information in the teacher handouts (see Appendices A through I) to support the teacher in helping to improve discussion skills and implementing literature circles. I summarized the research that supports the use of literature circles to be reviewed in the workshop (see Appendix A).

The information included in the literature review was used to develop a workshop to be used as staff development for middle level content area teachers. The method of presentation will be a workshop format. The initial workshop will require approximately five hours. The workshop may be presented in one or two day time period as scheduling allows. I would recommend an additional workshop to incorporate the teaching of content skills such as think-alouds, QAR's (Question Answer Relationships), vocabulary strategies and the use of graphic organizers. In implementing both workshops, I believe teachers would be better prepared to assist students in how to learn from text in future classrooms as well as help them to become lifetime readers of all kinds of texts.

Teachers will see the benefit of having students actively engaged in learning. The teacher will become a facilitator for learning rather than a distributor of knowledge.

**Discussion and Literature Circle Study**  
**in the**  
**Content Area Classroom**  
**Workshop Schedule**

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**Session One****1. Welcome/Overview of activities****Three Hours****2. Review of research**

- Literature Circles Defined
- Current Research Transparency
- Appendix A

**3. Key features of literature circle**

- Appendix B Transparency

**4. Skills to teach prior to literature circles**

- Transparency Concept to Teach
- Handout Discussion Web Strategy
- Appendix C

**5. Session one evaluation/reflection**

- Appendix D Handout
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**Session Two****1. Review evaluations/reflections** **Two Hours****2. How to select books for literature circles**

- **Appendix E Handout Suggested Book List**

**3. Participating in a literature circle**

- **Appendix F Transparency Step the Implementing**
- **Appendix G Handouts Role Sheets**
- **Appendix H Book Titles used in Workshop**

**4. Assessment in the classroom**

- **Appendix I Handout Teacher Observation**
- **Appendix I Handout Self- and Group Evaluation**

**5. Closing and Review of References for Workshop**

- **Appendix J Workshop References**

**6. Session two evaluation/reflection**

- **Appendix K Workshop Evaluation**
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### The Workshop:

The workshop will be a one-day format with a three hour morning session and a two hour afternoon session. It could be presented as two separate workshops if scheduling did not allow for a full day. The audience will be primarily middle school content area teachers, but could include any secondary level educator.

### Session One (Three Hours): Understanding Literature Circles

#### 20-30 Minutes: Welcome/Overview of activities

To begin the workshop I will introduce myself and welcome the teachers who are attending. I will ask the participants to write down concerns they have about literacy in their own classrooms. I will then ask them to pair up with someone next to them and share their concerns with that person. When we come back to whole group I will ask each pair to share a concern with the group. The facilitator will record the concerns on a whiteboard or large paper. I would expect that many of the responses would relate to being able to gain meaning from a text in some form. I will then give a brief overview of the workshop and include my objectives for the day: 1) review the research that supports the use of peer-led discussion in the classroom, 2) review and practice research-based strategies for improving students' discussion skills in the classroom, 3) define literature circles and provide a rationale for using them, 4) review and practice strategies to teach prior to literature circles, 5) provide an outline for implementing literature circles

and, 6) provide the group with a toolbox for classroom discussion and literature circles.

#### 20 Minutes: Review of Research

I will then use an overhead to display the research to support the use of literature circles in the classroom. Participants will be encouraged to ask questions and offer insight into their own experiences with literacy in the classroom (Appendix A).

#### 40 Minutes: Key Features of Literature Circles

I will define literature circles and review the transparency "Key Features of Literature Circles" (Appendix B). The group will then be shown the video Looking into Literature Circles (Stenhouse, 2001). This will provide them with a picture of what literature circles look like in the classroom. Following the video, I will ask the participants to turn to a neighbor and share something they learned about literature circles. We will discuss responses and questions in a whole group setting.

#### 60-70 Minutes: Skills to Teach Prior to Literature Circles

The next part of the morning session will include skills to be taught prior to implementing literature circles. I will briefly introduce other skills that a teacher might want to address using the overhead to display Concepts to Teach Prior to Literature Circles (see Appendix C). I will model the use of discussion webs allowing the teachers to participate in completing the web template. I will conclude with a description of each of the roles that may be used in the literature circle discussion. (See Appendix G). The areas to be

covered in this session are as follows:

- Think-aloud Strategies
- Cooperative Learning Strategies
- Discussion techniques using Discussion Webs
- Role Sheets

#### 20 Minutes: Evaluation and Reflection

The morning session will end by asking each teacher to complete an evaluation form (see Appendix D) and identify any questions or concerns they may have. By doing an evaluation after the first session, I will be able to address any concerns or questions prior to the beginning of the afternoon session.

#### Session Two (Two Hours): Getting Started with Literature Circles

##### 20 Minutes: Review of Evaluations and Reflections

The afternoon session will begin with a whole group discussion of questions that the participants identified on morning evaluations. I will then review the use of role sheets (see Appendix G). I will remind the participants that the role sheets are just one way of organizing literature circles. They may adapt or change the roles or circle to fit their own classroom and learning situations.

##### 20 Minutes: How to Select Books for Literature Circles

Next, I will talk about how to select books for literature circles. Daniels (1994) believes it is important to consider the levels of the students in your classroom, but also the interests of the students. I will provide a list of trade books that will be suitable for middle school students in the content area (see Appendix E). The

sample list included is taken from Hill, Johnson and Noe (1995). Participants will be encouraged to meet with the media specialist for help in selecting books or to refer to book lists such as the sample given in Appendix E. It is important to remind the participants that this is by no means an exhaustive list and that they should begin their search in the media center using various bibliographies (see Appendix J) as a resource. I will point out that book selection for the classroom can focus on authors, themes, genre, or personal interests. They can include non-fiction, historical fiction and context text and materials. I will then ask if there are any questions about literature circles before we continue.

#### 50 Minutes: Participating in Literature Circles

The next step is to provide participants with time to practice a literature circle discussion. Because of the time issue, groups will be using illustrated children's books for discussion. I will have a variety of titles centered around the theme of the Civil War (see Appendix H). I will do a brief book talk on each and then ask the participants to come up and select a book. Once they have a book they will meet with the other teachers who selected that same book. The groups will meet briefly to assign roles. It is up to the group to assign roles and they may draw for roles randomly or make personal selections based on interest as long as each member of the group knows what his or her role is prior to reading the text. Each member will read the text silently considering the role he or she has been assigned. After reading, the participants will be given 10-15 minutes to complete the role sheet that matches their assigned role. I will circulate around the room to answer any questions they have. At the end of 15 minutes, I will ask the



participants to return to their literature circle group. Next, teachers will be given time to participate in a brief literature circle discussion. The discussion director will lead the discussion by first sharing the questions for discussion. The discussion will continue with each participant sharing his or her role. There is no predetermined order in presenting the roles in the discussion. That decision can be made by the discussion director or by consensus in the group. I will remind participants that they may contribute to any part of discussion and need not wait until their role is presented. This should be a natural discussion of the text they have just read. I will circulate to answer any questions or concerns that the groups have. At the end of the time, I will ask the small groups to return to whole group.

#### 20 Minutes: Assessment in the Classroom

I will ask for comments, questions or concerns after having participated in a literature circle discussion. I would anticipate questions about how to assess literature circles. To address this, I will do a brief overview of assessment of literature circles including anecdotal records, role sheets and self-evaluation forms (see Appendix I). I will pass out index cards and ask the group how they might implement a literature circle discussion into their own classroom. I will ask them to share these at their tables while I circulate to address concerns.

#### 5 Minutes: Closing Remarks and Review of References

I will close the workshop by asking if any questions remain and then I will review the list of references for the workshop included in the packet (see Appendix J).

### 10 Minutes: Final Evaluation and Reflection

Participants will be asked to do an evaluation of the workshop (see Appendix K) reminding them that they do not need to include their name to allow for honest responses by the participants. I will thank them for coming and allow the remaining time for reflection and evaluation.

## Conclusion:

After completing the research for this project, I am more convinced than ever that we need to revise the way we teach in content area classrooms at the secondary level. We are enabling our students when we accept their weaknesses and feed the information to them orally. We need to improve their ability to interact with content texts and provide them with opportunities to explore and respond to printed material. Paratore & McCormack (1997) say we need to create meaningful learning opportunities for all of our students that allow them to make connections across culture, language and literacy competency. My own personal experience with literature circles in the classroom is in agreement with the literature reviewed. I see students taking control of their own learning, eager to come to the discussion with ideas prepared and ready to learn. Students come prepared because they know that they have a responsibility to the group and without their input, something will be missing from the discussion. Literature circle discussions can be a valuable step to improving the learning in content area classrooms.

Content area teachers will benefit from the workshop by learning about alternatives to traditional teacher-led discussions. As teachers provide these opportunities, students will become more engaged in learning and as a result will experience a deeper understanding of the material for that discipline (Daniels, 1994). Students will see the importance of reading across the curriculum and will have a more varied background with reading. They will experience what it is like to learn from and with each other. They will be empowered to direct their own learning and that is a vital skill to success in today's world. By implementing literature circles into the curriculum,

teacher's will be creating a climate for learning. Research confirms that there is no one perfect method to teach all students (Duffy & Hoffman, 1999) ,and literature circles can be a first step to meeting the needs of a diverse student population.

In addition to this workshop, teachers could benefit from further staff development in the areas of content reading strategies. Teachers could learn how to use graphic organizers to enhance comprehension. Future topics for investigation might include reciprocal teaching, interdisciplinary teaching and unit planning, the importance of activating prior knowledge with prereading guides, vocabulary instruction and study skills for learning from text.

Diversity is here to stay in our classrooms and we know from research that students come to us from a variety of backgrounds with varied abilities. We can no longer provide information through one method such as teacher lecture or teacher-led discussions. It is the teacher's responsibility to create an environment that includes a combination of methods to allow opportunities for all students to experience success (Duffy & Hoffman, 1999). Literature circles are one method that has potential to improve instruction and learning in the content area classroom.

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# Appendix A

- Literature Circles Defined
- Current Research about Literature Circles

## *What is a Literature Circle?*

"... literature study circles is an approach that emphasizes the reading and discussing of unabridged, unexcerpted children's literature in small, self-selected groups." (Samway and Whang, 1996).

"Literature circles are small, temporary discussion groups who have chosen to read the same story, poem, article or book. While reading each group-determined portion of the text, each member prepares to take specific responsibilities in the upcoming discussion..." (Daniels, 1994).

## *What does the Research tell us?*

1. *Literature circles promote a love for literature and positive attitudes toward reading.*

"The way students are asked to respond to literature in school influences their development as readers, writers, and thinkers as well as their enjoyment of literature." (Hill, 1995)

2. *Literature circles reflect a constructivist, child-centered model of literacy.*

"Opportunities to talk about books help readers construct an understanding that begins with their own experience and reaches beyond. (Hill, 1995).

3. *Literature circles encourage extensive and intensive reading.*

"Readers need time to read both extensively (widely) for enjoyment and information, and intensively to deepen and enrich their reading experience." (Harste, 1988)

4. *Literature circles invite natural discussions that lead to student inquiry and critical thinking.*

Samway and Whang report that "students naturally and spontaneously compared books and authors; initiated and sustained discussion topics as they arose; built their literary repertoires (eg. about books, authors, genres, and literary terms); and made associations between events and characters in books and their own lives...they became engaged, enthusiastic learners who were motivated to read listen and discuss. (Samway and Whang, 1991).

5. *Literature circles support diverse response to texts.*

- Traditional reading instructions leaned toward the efferent stance. (Skills/Information).



- An aesthetic stance begins with the reader's personal involvement with the text.
  - Literature circles can incorporate both. (Hill, 1995).
6. *Literature circles foster interaction and collaboration.*
  7. *Literature circles provide choice and encourage responsibility.*
    - Teachers who include choice in their language arts programs report improved student involvement and improved attitudes. (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1993; Swift, 1993).
    - Brian Cambourne(1988) emphasizes that student responsibility goes hand in hand with choice. They assume responsibility because they feel a sense of ownership.
  8. *Literature circles expose children to literature from multiple perspectives.*
  9. *Literature circles nurture reflection and self-evaluation.*
  10. *Students who participate in literature response groups score well on tests of reading (Spiegel, 1998).*
    - Evidence indicates that students in literature-based classrooms do as well or better on standardized tests (Hill, 1995)
    - "After the first year with LSC's her students' scores on the comprehension part of the (norm referenced) test were significantly higher than those of the children in classes that were not doing LSC/s." (Samway, 1996).
    - "We are pleased that students in the Book Club classrooms had standardized test scores as high as those of students in a more traditional reading program where skills were directly taught." (Raphael, 1994).
  11. *Literature circles can be used beginning with kindergarten through adult groups.*

Daniels includes descriptions of literature circles used in the classroom. "These innovators come from a wide range of city and suburban schools, and work at grade levels from kindergarten through college." (Daniels, 1994).

# Appendix B

- Key Features of Literature Circles

### Key Features of Literature Circles:

- ❖ Students choose their own reading material.
- ❖ Small temporary groups are formed, based on book choice.
- ❖ Different groups read different books.
- ❖ Groups meet on a regular, predictable schedule to discuss their reading.
- ❖ Kids use written or drawn notes to guide both their reading and discussion.
- ❖ Discussion topics come from the students.
- ❖ Group meetings aim to be open, natural conversations about books, so personal connections, digressions, and open-ended questions are welcome.
- ❖ In newly forming groups, students play a rotation assortment of task roles.
- ❖ The teacher serves as a facilitator, not a group member or instructor.
- ❖ Evaluation is by teacher observation and student self-evaluation.
- ❖ A spirit of playfulness and fun pervades the room.
- ❖ When books are finished, readers share with their classmates, and then new groups form around new reading choices.

(Daniels, 1994)

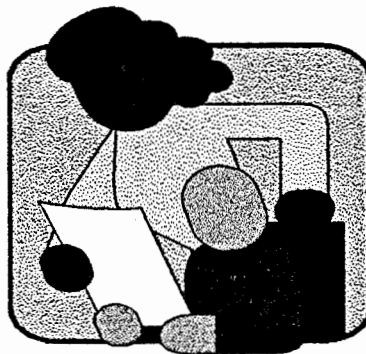


## Appendix C

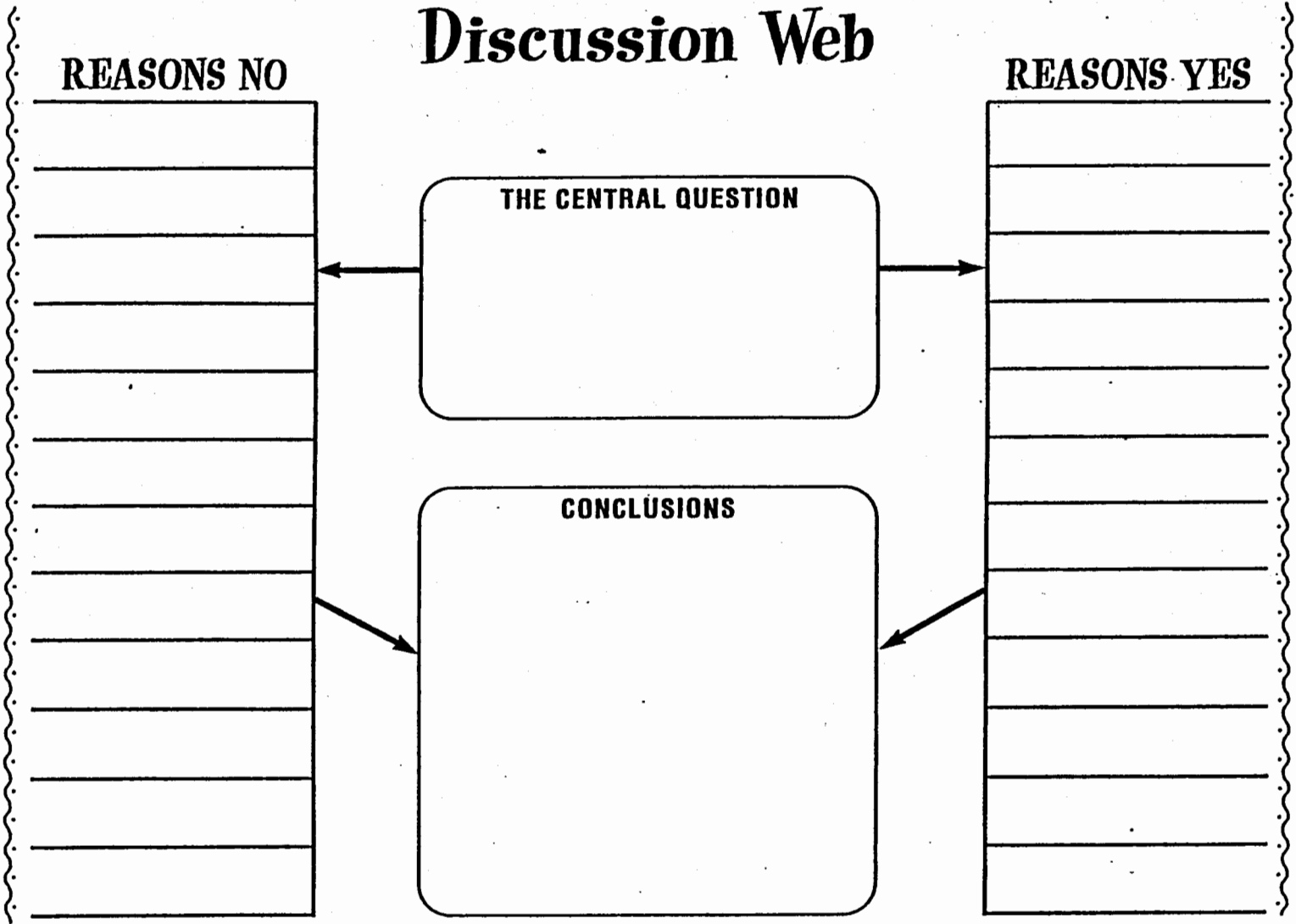
- Concepts to Teach Prior to Beginning Literature Circles
- Discussion Web Template

### Concepts to teach prior to beginning Literature Circles...

- **Think-a-loud Strategies:** Making predictions, describing how we visualize while we read, integrating new knowledge with old, talking through confusing passages, and strategies to clarify meaning.
- **Discussion Techniques:** Attending to topic, participating actively, asking questions for clarification, piggybacking on other's comments, disagreeing constructively, supporting opinions with evidence, and discussion etiquette.
- **Cooperative Learning Strategies (Social Skills):** encouraging others in the group, responding respectfully to ideas, eye contact, and sharing ideas. (Keegan, 1991)
- In addition, Daniels recommends teaching the different roles before beginning literature circles.



# Discussion Web



From Bromley, DeVitis, & Modlo, 1999

# Appendix D

- Session One Evaluation

## Workshop Evaluation Session One

1. List 2-4 details you learned about literature circles in this morning's session.
2. What questions do you have about literature circles?
3. Do you think you might implement literature circles in your classroom? Why or why not?
4. How do you think this morning's session could have been improved?



## Appendix E

- Suggested Book List for Literature Circles in the Content Area Classroom

## Suggested Book List for Literature Circles in the Middle Level Content Area

### War

Collier, J. & Collier, C. (1974). My brother sam is dead. New York, NY: Four Winds.

Filipovic, Z. (1994). Zlata's diary. New York, NY: Viking.

Gaeddert, L. (1994). Breaking free. New York, NY: Atheneum.

Keehn, S.M. (1991). I am regina. New York, NY: Dell.

Lowry, L. (1989). Number the stars. New York, NY: Dell.

Murphy, J. (1990). The boys' war. New York, NY: Clarion.

### American History

Avi. (1990). The true confessions of charlotte doyle. New York, NY: Orchard.

Freedman, R. (1980). Immigrant kids. New York, NY: Dutton.

Murphy, J. (1993). Across america on an emigrant train. New York, NY: Clarion.

Nixon, J.L. (1987). A family apart. New York, NY: Bantam.

Tate, E.E. (1990). Thank you dr. martin luther king, jr.! New York, NY: Bantam.

Yep, L. (1991). The star fisher. New York, NY: Scholastic

### Environment

Cherry, L. (1992). A river ran wild: An environmental story. New York, NY: Harcourt Brace.

DeFelice, C. (1994). Lostman's river. New York, NY: Macmillan.

George, J.C. (1983). The talking earth. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

Gregory, K. (1992). Earthquake at dawn. New York, NY: Harcourt Brace.

Lisle, J.T. (1993). Forest. New York, NY: Orchard.

Ruckman, I. (1984). Night of the twisters. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

# Appendix F

- Steps to Implementing Literature Circles

## Step by Step

1. Select five or six trade books for students to choose from. They may share a common author or theme. You want to offer a range of choices for students.
2. Introduce the books to the class. Give a brief overview of each book and then let students pick a book. This may be with a sign-up sheet or a ranking of choices.
3. Have students meet to set a schedule for reading and discussing. Decide on individual roles.
4. Students will complete the assigned readings, keeping individual roles and jobs in mind as he/she reads.
5. Students meet in groups to participate in a discussion about the book. Students may share individual roles, observations, reflections, predictions or questions based on their reading. Discussions are student-led and based on individual interpretations.
6. The teacher notes observations as discussions are occurring or by reviewing audio or videotapes from the discussion. The teacher provides feedback based on these observations. Feedback may also be provided through literature response logs.
7. Groups present their books to the class in a formal presentation.
8. Students assess their participation in the literature circle using a self-assessment form.

Adapted from Tompkins, 1998.

# Appendix G

- Role Sheets
  - ◆ Discussion Director
  - ◆ Word Finder
  - ◆ Map Maker
  - ◆ Passage Picker
  - ◆ Historical Reporter
  - ◆ Connector

## Discussion Director

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Group Members \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Book Title \_\_\_\_\_

Author \_\_\_\_\_

You are the discussion director. Your job is to identify good questions for discussion and be the leader of the group. Make sure your group is on task and facilitate an organized way to share responsibility in the group.

1. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Sample questions:

- What was going through your mind as you read this?
- Can someone summarize the reading?
- What do you think are the most important ideas from the reading?
- Did anything surprise you in the reading?

Adapted from Daniels, 1994

## Word Finder

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Group Members \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Book Title \_\_\_\_\_

Author \_\_\_\_\_

You are the Word Finder. Your job is to be on the lookout for especially important words- new, interesting, strange, important, puzzling, or unfamiliar words. Jot down the word and definition for each of the words. Identify a creative plan for sharing or introducing the words (word sorts, matching games, using the words in a new way, etc).

Page Number &  
Paragraph

Word

Definition

Plan


Adapted from Daniels, 1994

## Map Maker

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Group Members \_\_\_\_\_

Book Title \_\_\_\_\_

Author \_\_\_\_\_

You are the Map Maker. Your job is to make an illustrated map of the setting or region.

Your drawing should give the group a visual image of the setting or area that the story takes place in. During the discussion, you should ask the group for ideas about how they would picture the setting or area before you share your map.



## Passage Picker

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Group Members \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Book Title \_\_\_\_\_

Author \_\_\_\_\_

You are the Passage Picker. Your job is to locate a few special sections of the reading for the group to review and discuss. You want to help your group notice the most interesting, funny, puzzling, revealing or important sections of the text. You need to identify the passage and prepare a plan for sharing them with the group. You may read them to the group, ask the group to read it silently, or ask another member to read the passage orally.

Page/Paragraph No.	Reason for Choosing	Plan for Reading
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

## Historical Reporter

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Group Members \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Book Title \_\_\_\_\_

Author \_\_\_\_\_

You are the Historical Reporter. Your job is to report historical information important to the text. You need to research the time period from the text and provide information to the group. You also need to devise a plan for sharing your information. You might use a timeline, make an overhead that lists the facts you discovered, or present the information in a news article format.

Questions to Explore:

- What was the economy like during the time period?
- Were there any wars or conflicts going on during the time period?
- What new inventions were presented during this time?
- Who were the most influential people of this period?

Adapted from Daniels, 1994

## Connector

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Group Members \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Book Title \_\_\_\_\_

Author \_\_\_\_\_

You are the Connector. Your job is to find connections between the book and the world outside or your own life.

Suggestions for making connections:

- Connect the reading to your own experiences.
- Connect the reading to happenings at school or in your neighborhood.
- Connect the reading to things you have seen on T.V. programs or in the news.
- Connect the reading to other stories or books you have read.

# Appendix H

- Book Titles used in  
Workshop

## Civil War Picture Books for Workshop

Lewin, T. (2001). Red legs: A drummer boy of the civil war. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

Sateren, S.S. (Ed.). (2000). A civil war drummer boy: The diary of william bircher, 1861-1865. Mankato, MN: Blue Earth Books.

Ringgold, F. (1992). Aunt harriet's underground railroad in the sky. New York, NY: Crown.

Lyon, G.E. (1991). Cecil's story. New York, NY: Orchard.

Winter, J. (1988). Follow the drinking gourd. New York, NY: Knopf.

Polacco, P. (1994). Pink and say. New York, NY: Philomel.

# Appendix I

- Teacher Observation and Evaluation
- Self- and Group Evaluation and Reflection

## Literature Circle Discussion Observation and Evaluation

Group Members \_\_\_\_\_

---

Members Absent \_\_\_\_\_

Scoring: All Members...

Bring materials to group	5	4	3	2	1	0
Present role effectively	5	4	3	2	1	0
Contribute to group productivity	5	4	3	2	1	0
Listens attentively to discussion	5	4	3	2	1	0
Build upon the contributions of others	5	4	3	2	1	0
Use group time effectively	5	4	3	2	1	0

Total Group Score \_\_\_\_\_

Observations:

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## Literature Circle Discussion Self- and Group Evaluation

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Directions: Give each member of your group a grade for his or her participation in the discussion. Think about the quality of their comments, ability to bring up new topics for discussion, listening skills, staying on topic, and overall knowledge of the literature. Use the rubric below.

Key: \*=excellent  
+= average  
- = very little effort

Name	Score		
1. _____	*	+	--
2. _____	*	+	--
3. _____	*	+	--
4. _____	*	+	--
5. _____	*	+	--
6. _____	*	+	--

Answer the following questions about your own participation in the group. You may answer on the back or on a separate sheet of paper.

1. What have you learned from this literature circle discussion?
2. What did you do well in the literature circle discussion?
3. What could you work on next time to improve your participation?
4. Reflect on the discussions you have had in the last several weeks. What is your overall evaluation of literature circles? What do you see as the value in participating in literature circle discussions as compared to whole class work?
5. Do you have any other comments or suggestions about literature circles?



# Appendix J

- References for the Workshop

## References for the Workshop

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# Appendix K

- Final Workshop Evaluation

## Workshop Final Evaluation

### Literature Circles in the Content Area Classroom

1. Was the information presented clearly and effectively? What questions remain for you?
2. How might you use the information presented in your own classroom?
3. What follow-up would you like to have to help you use the ideas you learned today?
4. How do you think this workshop could be improved?

## Roles for Literature Circle Participants

<b>Discussion Director</b>	The discussion director will identify questions for discussion and be the leader of the discussion.
<b>Word Finder</b>	The word finder will identify important vocabulary for word study in the group.
<b>Map Maker</b>	The map maker will create an illustrated map of the setting or region where the story takes place.
<b>Passage Picker</b>	The passage picker will locate special sections of the reading for further review and discussion in the group.
<b>Historical Reporter</b>	The historical reporter will relay historical information to the group that is important to the text.
<b>Connector</b>	The connector will find connections between the text and the world outside or his/her own life.

Figure 1. Summary of roles to be used in literature circles.