Literature Circles: A Strategy Across Disciplines

Are you eager to create lifelong readers? Suggest to the teachers in your school that they try literature circles.

by Alexa Sandmann

Literature circles give students the opportunity to look at a piece of text from various perspectives. The key feature of this strategy is student leadership. Literature circles are neither teacher-driven nor teacher-monitored; students make the choices. They choose the text they will discuss and also are given the autonomy to choose their role, or the way they will participate.

Students usually take some kind of notes as they read. Then, when they finish discussing the text they make some kind of presentation to the class. The teacher’s role is to frame this experience with mini-lessons, if needed. While literature circles have historically focused on fiction, the strategy also can be used to embed more nonfiction text within the disciplines.

Quick Start

Teachers who are eager to include more opportunities for students to read within their discipline might want to begin with an activity that is in the spirit of literature circles but not quite as structured. They can shorten the formal process by creating a small-group literature experience that can stand on its own.

To begin, they should divide the class into groups of six students each and provide illustrated books (or articles) on the topic at hand to each group. (Groups can work with the same book or article, or with different materials.) Each student in each group also will need a sheet of paper with one of the following questions printed at the top:

1. What did you learn?
2. How did this text make you feel?
3. How did the illustrations/photographs contribute to what you learned or felt?
4. Could you identify with any particular person, event, or piece of information? If so, which one and why?
5. Why should students read this kind of book/article? Why should they know this information? How does it have relevance in today’s society?
6. Review your answers to the previous five questions. Then, brainstorm an activity your group could do to share your most significant responses to the text you read. Be ready to present your idea to the class.

Each student should read his or her question aloud to fellow group members. This will set a purpose for reading. Then, one or two students should read the text to the group. Students then respond to each question, with the “owner” of the question facilitating the discussion and recording the answers on the sheet of paper.

Extending this Experience

If students are responsive to this activity, teachers might want to find additional texts to supplement the topic they are teaching and ask students to respond by taking on specific roles: focus finder, excerpt extractor, word wonderer, meaning maker, and artistic achiever. These roles, which are of my own creation, are inspired by the work of Harvey Daniels (1994). They are designed to provide additional focus for students as consumers of a wide variety of texts.

The focus finder looks for the key concepts of the text. The excerpt extractor looks for specific passages that he or she believes others will find significant. The word wonderer looks for unknown or interesting words. The meaning maker looks for connections to the
text, and the artistic achiever makes a drawing that can help readers visualize the information.

Middle school students are ready for articles from *Time, Newsweek, U.S. News & World Report, Scientific American*, and *National Geographic*. Short newspaper and magazine articles work especially well when introducing literature circles because they are brief, making it easy for students to read the text and learn how to complete the different roles. Small-group sets of nonfiction books also work well. Working in groups allows students to support one another, tackling challenging passages together. The fact that they are interested in the topic provides motivation—which is why student choice is so important when using this strategy.

**Extending the Strategy**

Teachers also might want to try using fiction in content-area classes. For example, students in fifth- or sixth-grade science might read *Hoot* by Carl Hiaasen, a story about conservation. Seventh and eighth graders could read *Catalyst* by Laurie Halse Anderson, a novel that uses chemistry to unite concepts. Students in all grades could read *Things Not Seen* by Andrew Clements, a story that involves electromagnetism.

The options are almost unlimited when it comes to social studies. Fifth and sixth graders would enjoy Karen Hesse’s *Out of the Dust*, a story about the Great Depression and the dust bowl. Seventh and eighth graders could readily handle Joan Bauer’s *Hope Was Here*, a novel about the democratic process. All grades could learn from Ellen Wittlinger’s *Gracie’s Girl*, a story of homelessness.

Fiction that works in math class is harder to find, although students will enjoy puzzling out *The Westing Game* by Ellen Raskin. Mature eighth graders might enjoy Mark Haddon’s *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, the story of an autistic boy whose math ability is amazing.

Favorites for a reading/language arts class (although all are suitable for social studies as well) are:

- *Surviving the Applewhites*, by Stephanie Tolan, about a troubled young man who finds hope in a most unusual family.
- *Stargirl*, by Jerry Spinelli, about a girl who challenges the conventional social mores of high school and the effect she has on one young man in particular and the community in general.
- *Homeless Bird*, by Gloria Whelan, a contemporary story of a young woman in India.
- *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, by Christopher Paul Curtis, a story that addresses race relations in America before the civil rights era.
- *The Cay*, by Theodore Taylor, a story set during World War II that addresses stereotyping, how it induces prejudice, and how prejudice can be unlearned.
- *Burning Up*, by Caroline B. Cooney, a story of social activism about a young woman who recognizes prejudice and fights against it.
- *The Dark-Thirty: Southern Tales of the Supernatural*, by Patricia McKissack, is a book of short stories that could prompt excellent discussions.

The impetus for literature circles comes primarily from the work of Daniels (1994) and Hill, Johnson, and Noe (1995), although others have written about this kind of experience with books. Teachers who are interested in exploring all the details of this strategy should be encouraged to consult one or more of these excellent texts as well as the others listed below.

**References**


**Alexa Sandmann** is associate professor of literacy at Kent State University. Her e-mail address is asandman@kent.edu.
Recent papers in Academic Writing Across the Disciplines. Papers. People. The chapter explores personal narrative, interview analysis and extant literature on the subject, ultimately arguing that visual and performing arts disciplines have much to offer to writing studies in terms of a reconsideration of reflective, embodied, exploratory and assistive approaches to writing. Literature Circles in EFL are teacher accompanied classroom discussion groups among English as a foreign language learners, who regularly get together in class to speak about and share their ideas, and comment on others' interpretations about the previously determined section of a graded reader in English, using their 'role-sheets' and 'student journals' in collaboration with each other.