

Implementing Literature Circles

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According to Vygotski (1934/1978) learning takes place through social interaction. Similarly, Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory posits reading requires interaction between reader and text. LCs acknowledge that meaning from reading is derived through transaction between the mind and text. Further, it invites other interpretations by collectively creating meaning in a group context. LCs support understanding by instituting the "two heads are better than one", however, in this case, there are up to five heads. In addition, specific research on LCs supports its use in classrooms (Clark & Holwadel, 2007). Although the following method of literature circles is unique, the underlying methods are research based. The goal of these literature circles is for each member to contribute in the negotiation of meaning. In order to achieve this, role assignment was eliminated, and students were trained in generating higher-level questions, and making inferences. High-level questions refer to those unanswered by the text, but require additional thought on the part of the reader—inferring.

Questioning

The National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000) analyzed experimental studies in reading. The analysis revealed that generating questions is an effective means for developing reading comprehension. Costa's (Costa & Kallick, 2000) three levels of questioning were used to teach students to generate important high level questions. Cognitive dissonance, or inquiry, is used to engage the minds of students. This mentality contends that discrepancy in content raised by the teacher or student is highly engaging when striving for understanding. Essentially, it evokes interesting discussions. Each level of questioning is based on certain characteristics.

Level 1 questions only require input. For example, these questions ask students to name, identify, recall, or define. The answers to level 1 questions are extrapolated from the text, and require no further processing or output (Costa & Kallick, 2000). The next two levels reflect higher-order thinking questions. Level 2 questions ask students to process information. Examples of this are asking students make analogies, compare and contrast, synthesize, summarize, analyze, or infer. Level 3 questions elicit output. This type of questioning engages students in evaluating, generalizing, imagining, judging, speculating, or predicting (for more examples see *Habits of Mind: Activating and Engaging* or visit www.habits-of-mind.net).

The three levels of questioning were introduced through an adaptation of the Concept Attainment Strategy (CAS; Silver & Strong, 2003). The strategy is built on the premise, "that which you discover, you own." CAS essentially requires students to inductively create the characteristics of a concept before it is named. In this case, there are three concepts. Questions are introduced individually (see Table 1 for questions), and students' hypothesize why each question is under different columns (see Table 2 for hypotheses). The lesson will now be described in detail.

The teacher read the poem *Confession* by Bruce Lansky (from www.gigglepoetry.com). After the poem was read aloud, the teacher placed the first three questions, one under each column.

Students were asked to identify characteristics of each question. Further, students determined how the questions were different. Once responses were recorded, the second row of questions was added. This time students could not only look at the questions, contrasted differences, but compared similarities within columns (see Concept Attainment Strategy later in this guide).

Figure 1 The Introductory CAS Questioning Lesson

Concept A [level 1]	Concept B [level 2]	Concept C [level 3]
What did the teacher eat? What did the teacher waste through the night? Who should not find out?	Is there anyone you know like this teacher? Can you compare yourself to the teacher? What is this poem mostly about?	What would it be like to live like this teacher? What do you think will happen if the students find out? What would it be like to such a slob?

Figure 2 Third Graders List of Question Characteristics

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
easier what happened right out of the book answers found in the book	harder use your brain and book you have to think you can compare	harder asks what you think makes you predict not in the book you have to use your brain you have to imagine

Inferring

It is important to note that predictions and connections are used in the LC discussion, but these components of inferring were taught in the current or previous grades. It may be necessary teach these strategies if assessment reveals a deficiency. The CAS lesson is used again, and students makes hypotheses regarding the nature of the statements (see Table 3).

Table 3 Third Graders List of Statement Characteristics

Text Observations	Inferences
you can see it it is in the book it really happened	it is what you think feelings use your brain and book

Connecting Questioning and Inferring

This brief review activity also helped students connect questioning and inferring. Students brainstormed everything they recalled about inferring. Once a list was generated, the students created another list with their memories of Costa’s questions. Once the responses were exhaust students talked with their peers about comparing and contrasting the lists. Many of the same characteristics appeared on both lists such as think, use text and brain, helps us understand, predictions, and infer. Students were able to connect the two connections. One such connection

was the need to infer answers to level 2 and 3 questions. After students understood the connection, the remaining lessons incorporated both inferences and questions.

Language Stems

The reading coach provided language stems to support the new learning. Statements that begin text observations include, I saw, I read, the characters are, the conflict is, and so on. Inferences might be started with I infer, I think, I predict, or I imagined. Level 1 questions might stem from who, what, when, or where. Helpful stems for level 2 include why, can you compare, and how. Level 3 questions are often started with what if, can you imagine, what do you think, and can you predict. These, of course, are not hard and fast, but useful for beginners. During the lesson, the aforementioned stems were scrambled, and handed out to the students. The stems were written on sentence strips with magnetic strips attached to the back. It was the students' jobs to place them under the correct heading. Headings were separated primarily by statements vs. questions. Beneath statements were text observations and inferences. Under the questions heading were the subheadings level 1, level 2, and level 3. The class engaged in a discussion providing arguments behind the language stems placements. At the conclusion of the lesson, students were aware the stems acted as guides, and were not static.

Determining Importance of Questions and Inferences

Finally, students need to know the difference between important and unimportant inferences and questions. Important describes inferences and questions that aid the reader in understanding the text. Unimportant questions and inferences, as explained to the students, are a waste of time. This can be taught in a variety of ways, but this reading coach had students write their questions and inferences on sticky notes, and categorize them on a class chart as important or unimportant.

Lit Circle Guidelines

Decentralizing the role of the teacher is never warranted unless the students have received adequate training. Therefore, intense training precedes the students meet for the first time. Each subheading includes the students' as well as the teacher's role. The teacher's role decreases as the students' roles increase. The model described below follows a gradual release of responsibility.

Discussion Conditions

The conditions demand respect, collective understanding, and responsible group members. The school wide behavior program is based on the CHAMPS model (XXXX). The "C" stands for *conversation*. This informs whether an activity allows talking. Literature circles not only allow talking, but depend on it. The "H" stands for *help*. Students engaged in LCs get help by asking or consulting a group member—teacher assistance is a last resort. The desired *activity* is represented by the "A." Students are actively constructing meaning throughout the LC. *Movement* ("M") is allowed, but only if necessary. There are few reasons for movement during the discussion time. Finally, the "P" stands for *participate*. What does look like when a student is participating in a LC? Members collectively create understanding. These expectations are posted, and must be followed in order to be a CHAMP during LCs (see figure 1).

Figure 1 Literature Circle CHAMPS Expectations

C	Yes, but be respectful
H	Ask/consult a group member, ask the teacher last
A	Construct Meaning
M	Yes, if needed
P	Collectively Create Understanding

Rubric

Rubrics are an effective way to measure skills. In this case, a rubric (figure 2) was created to evaluate LC members' quality of participation. It was shaped by the input of students, and observing good student discussions. Each class was given an opportunity to create their own rubric. In the end, of course, it reflected the many of the necessary characteristics of a high level discussion. However, the rubric is always subject to change as LCs become more advanced.

Figure 2 Literature Circle Rubric

Evaluation	Respect, Attention, Participation (RAP)
Elite	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion is clear and concise. • Discussion is thoughtful and insightful (inferential marathon). • Student examines author's purpose. • Includes details that help the reader understand events from the text. • Poses many important questions that extend beyond the text (mostly level 2 or 3). • Makes predictions about future events. • Makes connections to the text and beyond. • Uses text evidence.
Expert	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion is clear. • Discussion is somewhat thoughtful. • Includes some details that help the reader understand events from the text. • Poses questions from the text and beyond (level 1-3). • Makes predictions about future events. • Makes connections to the text. • Uses text evidence.

<p>Intermediate</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This discussion is functional. • Includes some details that help the reader understand events from the text. • Poses a question from the text (level 1). • Makes a prediction about future events, but they don't make sense. • Makes some connections to the text that do not aid in understanding. • References text, but text does not support claim.
<p>Beginner</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This entry is not clear. • Includes few details that help the reader understand events from the text. • Poses no questions from the text. • Makes few or misleading predictions about future events. • Makes few connections to the text. • Does not reference text.

Feedback

During the training period, teachers have a significant role in giving feedback to the LC members. While the members discuss the reading, teachers note specific types of responses and questions observed. In addition, teachers write down strengths of the conversation as a whole, and aspects that need improvement to be discussed during the reflection phase.

The following example is from the first LC meeting in a third grade classroom. This group read the first chapter in *Horrible Harry's Secret*, a DRA level 24. The group consisted of three girls, and one boy, all of which were reading slightly below grade level. This is an exact representation of the notes taken during the group's discussion. The codes appear first, and any additional notes follow (see Figure 4 for Discussion Codes).

Girl 1

Q2, P, I, D, D, I, I, I, I, I

Ask more questions, and make predictions

Girl 2

I, Q2, I, Q2, D, I, I, I, Q2

Need predictions, connections, and level 3 questions

Girl 3

I, I, TE, I, I, D, I, Q2, I, D, P

Missing connections, level 3 questions, and needs to ask more questions

Boy 1

Q2, P, I, D, Q2, I, P, I, I, Q2, D, Q2, I, P, I

Need connections and level 3 questions

The teacher reads the notes back to the student. For example, “Girl 2, you made an inference, followed by a level 2 question, another inference, a level 2 question, gave details, made three inferences in a row, and finally asked a level 2 question.” The feedback is descriptive and immediate. At this point, only note the strengths, and commend students for their specific contributions. Students can now reflect on the discussion to prepare for their self-evaluation. However, once the teachers are no longer coaching, students must base their evaluations on memory, what is written down, and their other group members’ accounts of the discussion.

Figure 4 Discussion Coding

I = Inference
P = Prediction
C = Connection
C/C=Compare/Contrast
Q1 = Level 1 Question
Q2 = Level 2 Question
Q3 = Level 3 Question
TE = Used text evidence (actually opened the book and read it)
D = Used details from the story to explain their thinking
AP = Author’s Purpose

Self-Monitoring

Each group (or student) has a copy of the LC rubric. Students read the rubric before they begin the discussion. This helps remind them of their goal to become elite LC members. Students read the rubric again after their discussion in preparation for the self-evaluation. At this time the student states the level of their participation—either beginner, intermediate, expert, or elite (see figure 2)—and why they deserved the rating.

In the early stages of LCs the evaluation is based on the feedback from the teacher. It is advised to discuss why the teacher agrees or disagrees with the student’s evaluation. Many times, the students rank themselves too low; therefore, the teacher must point on the strengths of the member’s participation (only one student ranked too high). Use the specific vocabulary from the rubric when discussing the student evaluation. Finally, the teacher vocalizes the missing components of the discussion that will enable a student to move to the next level (see figure 4). For example, if there was a lack of particular questions, or absence of predictions, the student should be prompted to use them in the next LC meeting.

Once the teacher is no longer observing the group discussion, the students have a responsibility to check in with the teacher, and state their level of evaluation. It is the teacher’s decision whether to inquire about the reasoning behind the evaluation. It is important that students continue to improve their specific discussion techniques regardless of the presence of the teacher.

Reflection

Not only should the individuals be assessed, but the group as a whole. While the teacher is still present as an observer, a group evaluation is given—what went well, and what aspects need improvement. This can be scribed on a T-chart (see table 4), and read to the group after the

student evaluations. However, when groups are on their own they can discuss it orally. This reflection can also be written in a reading journal along with their evaluation, or reported orally to the teacher. At the teacher’s discretion, groups can either write evaluations and reflections, report orally, or the teacher can elicit them group by group.

Table 4 Example of 4th Grade Group Evaluation

Good	Needs Improvement
Debate Using text evidence Using “because” to explain inferences Not talking over one another	Focus on the book Answer questions before moving on Use character’s names in discussion

Materials

Literature circles require the bare necessities: something to read, and somewhere to write. The students will need an appropriate text. Because students will be working on their own, the text should be close to their independent reading level.

Grouping

Creating the groups was relatively simple. The students who read on similar levels were grouped together. These similar levels usually ranged between zero and four levels (see table 5). Therefore, on rare occasions students in the group were reading on their instructional level. However, the stronger readers in the group served as mentors who helped scaffold comprehension through meaningful discussion. Conversely, the stronger readers were reading easy material. However, it was found that many proficient readers spend their time reading easy relatively easy material (Allington, 1983). The goal is to expose them to many different texts, and motivate students through success.

Table 5 One Third Grade Classroom (coded names)

<u>BOOK LEVEL 24</u>	<u>BOOK LEVEL 44</u>	<u>BOOK LEVEL 30</u>	<u>BOOK LEVEL 34</u>
Al 20	Ch 40	Be 34	Ha 34
Ri 24	Me 50	Ja 30	Ju 30
Le 28		An 34	Da 34
Se 24		Ma 30	Ra 34

Timing

Time is definitely a hot commodity for teachers. Because time is a nonrenewable resource, teachers need to analyze instruction for efficiency. There is a plethora of instructional strategies in the field, and many are effective, but the skilled teacher needs to fill time with the most efficient as well as effective.

The subheadings below describe how this reading coach implemented literature circles. The times are delineated based on the reading coach implementing the circles; nevertheless, classroom teachers can use this framework with their own class or grade level. Keep in mind, however, all the components are necessary, but the scheduling is done on the micro-level.

Scheduling

It is important to note that it was decided to implement literature circles in third grade monolingual, and fourth grade bilingual first. The decision was based on need, and teachers' receptiveness to new programs.

Once the initiative was approved by administrators, the reading coach began meeting with teachers. Fortunately, the early release day served as primetime to engage teachers in the literature circle conversation. The conversation consisted of a brief overview, goals, and time for questions. Once teachers were fully informed, times were discussed. All four third grade monolingual classrooms were scheduled. Two lessons were scheduled back to back in the morning, and the other two back to back in the afternoon. The lessons were delivered Monday through Thursday for twenty minutes at a time. The two bilingual fourth grade classrooms were set to be served once in the morning and again in the afternoon. Instruction was given Monday, Wednesday, and Friday for 30 minutes per session. The preparatory lessons were delivered over a three week period.

Lessons

During this preparatory period (before LCs met), students are trained in high level discussion techniques; as detailed earlier, students learn to ask leveled questions, and make important inference as they read. The preparatory lessons take 20-30 minutes each. The lessons follow the same schedule agreed upon by the various teachers involved.

Group Meetings

Literature Circles were allotted a total of 30 minutes per day. Students read for 20 minutes, and discussed for ten. Subsequent to the three weeks of preparatory lessons, teachers were encouraged to incorporate LC time daily. Here is a quick brief regarding the lit circle procedures for after the coach's time is complete.

Literature Circle Procedure

I = inference

P = prediction

C = connection

C/C=Compare/Contrast

Q1 = Level 1 Question

Q2 = Level 2 Question

Q3 = Level 3 Question

TE = Used text evidence (actually opened the book and read it)

D = used details from the story to explain their thinking.

If they make an important inference or ask an unimportant question, I circle the Q2, for example, and draw a line through it.

Once the groups have finished we match their discussion to the rubric. I read off all my notes. The notes usually look like this:

Boy

I I Q2 C TE D I Q3 etc...

Girl

Q3 I C TE D P etc...

Once I read back all the strategies they used, they evaluate themselves based on the rubric. If the student grades to low or too high, I redirect them to the rubric. Finally, students discuss what went well, and what they should work on for the next meeting.

I give 20/25 minutes for reading, and 5/10 for discussion.

Reflections on Lit Circles: The Good, The Bad, and the Awesome

The first round of implementation is now complete. The classroom teachers of the first round were asked to complete a survey in order to ensure the process becomes more effective and efficient in future implementations. Overall, the teachers are pleased with the preparatory lessons and resulting LCs.

Preparatory Lessons

The teachers raved about the effectiveness of the lessons. During the first week of questioning lessons an unsolicited email read, “Just wanted to say thank you for an awesome week. The students are learning so much! Some of them are even leveling my questions!” The teachers acknowledged that students got a grasp on questioning and inferring. It was suggested, however, that students should be given more time to practice with partners, and the reading coach definitely agrees. The reading coach will suggest teachers give students time to practice with partners between the deliveries of lessons. Unfortunately, the time allotted to the reading coach did not allow for extended time to practice, but teachers are open to supporting the learning throughout the day. Reportedly, more time also needs to be given to the rubric. This was the last lesson delivered, and the students (and reading coach) were eager to assemble their LCs. Therefore, it has been suggested that classroom teachers revisit the rubric through a reteach. More generally, reteaching is recommended anytime a large proportion of the students are having difficulty with previous concepts or new issues stemming from the LCs. Ideal LCs do not happen overnight, and need of further coaching.

The reading coach’s faculty advisor also had a concern. The reading coach’s high energy and unorthodox behavior is always evident in the lessons, therefore the advisor is concerned whether the lessons can be effectively replicated. To alleviate this concern, the instructional specialist (IS) observed the lessons, transcribed them, and delivered them to other classes. The students were able to demonstrate understanding of the major topics covered—generating questions, and inferring. In fact, it was necessary for the IS to deliver the lessons to the younger bilingual students because she speaks Spanish.

Literature Circles

The students were actively engaged in their LCs. Because it was a motivating time, students read carefully before the meeting. All students, on every observed occasion, were prepared with questions and inferences. Students typically began as intermediate with only a few exceptions: there were 5 experts and 3 beginners during the first meeting. By the end of the first week, the majority of the students were evaluated as experts. There was only one beginner; also, several elites were observed. Overt shyness is attributed to the beginner's rating; the student's contribution was meaningful and important, but the frequency was limited in the first week. Reports from the teacher indicate the student is participating on an expert level at this time.

Shyness was also a concern in one third grade classroom. The reading coach observed a third grade LC discussion on the second day of practice. Although the two students were the highest readers in the class, the discussion was almost nonexistent. The reading coach reported the instance, and suggested the classroom teacher meet with the group the following day. It was likely the students would be more comfortable. The next day, the group members were described as expert LC members by the observing classroom teacher. The discussion, unfortunately, still had periods of silence, yet members demonstrated marked improvement. Another group that experienced silence was in the fourth grade bilingual class. This group, the only other consisting of two members, was in moderate need of a pick-me-up. It was decided that LCs should consist of more than two students to foster discussion.

Two teachers expressed concerns for struggling readers. Specifically, one teacher was concerned about a particular student's ability to effectively engage in the LC. The student is identified as at-risk due to poor performance on report cards and as an ELL. The reading coach shares the same concern, but initially made a decision to include the student in a group reading 8 DRA levels above. The student, unfortunately, is an outlier. Although her skills did mature during the first week of LCs, it was decided that the student would meet with a mentor. The goal is to increase the student's volume of reading on the independent level before including her in the LC. Unfortunately, at this time, the decision eliminated the prospect of the student participating in the LC. Generally, teachers were concerned about the lower level groups, but assessment has revealed students reading below grade level are capable of meeting LC expectations. In fact, had the student aforementioned not been an outlier, a complete LC would have been formed. Currently, the prospect of flexible grouping across grade levels is being discussed to meet the needs of outliers.

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