

Subject Area: English/Language Arts (Reading/Literature)

Grade Level: Grades 4-12

Title of Instructional Method: Using Literature Circles in the Classroom

Description of Instructional Method:

In literature circles, small groups of students gather together to discuss a piece of literature in depth. The discussion is guided by students' response to what they have read. Literature circles provide a way for students to engage in critical thinking and reflection as they read, discuss, and respond to books. Collaboration is at the heart of this approach. Students reshape and add onto their understanding as they construct meaning with other readers. Finally, literature circles guide students to deeper understanding of what they read, through structured discussion and extended written and artistic response. Literature circles are reader response centered, structured for student independence, responsibility, and ownership, guided by primarily student insights and questions, and are flexible and fluid.

Susan Lloyd collaborated with a sixth-grade teacher and adopted his class for several months. The self-contained sixth-grade class composed of 28 students represented of a variety of backgrounds. Lloyd states that the instructional purpose of implementing literature circles around a comprehension strategy is for students to enjoy, analyze, and interpret the book, use the questions recorded as a catalyst for discussion, and gain control and independence through genuine conversations around a text.

References:

Lloyd, S.L. (2004). Using Comprehension Strategies as a Springboard for Student Talk. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 48 (2), 114-124. (Booth Library, Ebsco)

Candler, L. (n.d). *Literature Circle Models*. Retrieved January 15, 2007, from <http://home.att.net/~TEACHING/litcirclemodels.htm> (website)

Overview of Literature Circles. Retrieved January 15, 2007, from <http://www.litcircles.org/Overview/overview.html> (website)

“How –To” Information:

- Teacher selects a set of books that represent a range of reading levels. Class and group size can help determine the number of books students have to choose from.
- Introduce the teacher-selected books to the class and instruct students to identify their top two choices, using the back-cover captions to hook the students’ attention.
- Have students preview the books with the goal of selecting their top two choices during independent reading. As students preview the text, give them two simple questions to ask themselves after reading the first few pages: What was it about? Do I want to read on? Part of this discussion will require students to think metacognitively about the process of reading, so matching students to the appropriate level of text is important. During the previewing time, circulate to each student with the goal of guiding the selection, but the ultimate decision is left entirely to the students. Using the choices made, place the students into book groups.
- In their groups have students schedule four meeting dates that span three weeks. Each book group will then decide on the number of pages to read for discussion in order to finish the book by the last meeting date.
- Have the students develop reading logs (a simple notebook with questions or opinions about the readings). While reading their books, students will record questions in their reading logs to discuss with the group on the next meeting date. Instruct students not to discuss their questions until the next meeting (this can build anticipation).

- Teacher should give students clear guidelines and behavioral expectations when meeting with their book groups (For example, construct with the class a T chart to list what a literature circle looks and sounds like).
- Once guidelines have been established, have students review their reading logs and place a star next to the two most powerful questions. Now have students move to their meeting place with their book and reading log.
- While students are sharing their stated questions and discussing the answers, circulate from group to group to record anecdotal notes.

Additional Information

To expand the concept of literature circles, teachers can use a variety of different techniques and activities. The following list can help make literature circles a success for both the teacher and students.

- Have students form very tight circles with their chairs facing one another and knees touching
- Assign group meeting locations as far apart as possible so that the noise level was conducive for conversation
- Students have fun decorating their own reading logs to reflect their own personalities
- Can have students use sticky notes to mark passages in their readings that they have questions about
- Taking notes as the teacher moves from group to group serves four purpose: (1) Teacher stays out of the conversation and listens more; (2) when students see the teacher recording their comments, they attach importance to their contributions; (3) gives time to assess individual students as they used the strategy; and (4) can use your notes at the end of the discussions to compliment and praise individuals with specific comments as a part of the lesson summary.
- Sometimes student discussions will take turns off track. To help with this problem place a tape recorder in the center of each group. The recorder serves an extension of the teacher's presence and reminded students to return to the focus of the text when becoming sidetracked
- When groups finish their books, have them evaluate their participation

Implications for Practice/Other Considerations:

Teachers must not focus solely on one reading strategy when using literature circles. To focus exclusively on one strategy undermines the integration of strategies, which is the natural process as a reader makes sense of a text. Using a round-robin format of roles was too restrictive and limited the reciprocity of real conversation. Implementing a small-group format gave students the opportunity to explore the comprehension strategy and allows for a greater number of students to participate in the discussion. Teachers must also realize that different strategies will work for different students. If a certain aspect of the literature circle is not working for a group of students, then change it a little so that it works for the students.

Additional Links:

www.literaturecircles.com/article1.htm

www.edselect.com/literature_circles.htm

www.emints.org/ethemes/resources/S00001263.shtml

www.education-world.com/a_curr/curr259.shtml

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