

Literature Circles in Middle School: Living in This World With Courage and Hope

Symposium 11

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Literature Circles Resource Center

<http://fac-staff.seattleu.edu/kschlnoe/LitCircles>

This handout gives you the bare bones structure for literature circles in middle school and is organized around the basic decisions you will need to make as you start literature circles for the very first time. This is a place to begin – from here, you can gradually add components and make changes that meet the specific needs of your students and your style of teaching.

1. *Choosing Books*

<http://fac-staff.seattleu.edu/kschlnoe/LitCircles/ChoosingBooks/choosingbooks.html>

Teacher: You can do literature circles with small groups of students reading a variety of books – or with all students reading the same book. Many teachers begin with the books they have on hand, a literature anthology, or nonfiction. Later, they look for books that will invite response – funny, action-packed, meaningful.

Students: Literature circles depend upon student choice – choice in books, choices in what to talk about, choices in how to respond in writing or through the arts. With some assistance, even struggling readers can construct meaning with others as they talk about books in literature circles. Therefore, one of the most important principles is to guide students to select the book that they want to read and discuss with others.

- **Book talk:** Hold up each book as you describe it to students. You might share a short summary, read aloud an engaging excerpt, or simply tell students what it's about. After the book talk, many teachers will array the books from easiest to harder to help students decide whether the book will be one they can read and discuss. Before students select, ask them to “get their hands on” the book – get it into their hands to read a page or two or look over to see if it seems interesting.

- **Ballots:** Students select their first, second, and third choice books on a ballot or on a plain piece of paper.

- **Form groups:** Form the groups trying to give as many students as possible their first choice book. However, you'll also want to keep in mind students who may have a difficult time working together, students who may need additional support as they read the book. Because most teachers may not have enough books for everyone to have a first choice every time, they make a commitment to students to keep track of the choices and to give a first choice at the next round of literature circles.

2. *Reading and Preparing for Discussion*

<http://fac-staff.seattleu.edu/kschlnoe/LitCircles/Discussion/prep.html>

- **Determine how much to read:** Students reading short stories may be able to read the entire selection before they discuss. For novels, a good rule of thumb is to have students discuss

at three points in the book – after the first third or so, somewhere near the middle, and at the end. You can divide the books into reading segments – or you can guide students to look over the book, taking into account how many discussion days you have set aside, and divide up their book themselves. This will involve a couple of focus lessons: How to identify good “discussion points,” how to come to agreement on how much each group member can read at one time, how to figure out logical stopping places.

- **Set a reading, discussion, and writing schedule:** You can use a calendar to either assign groups to discussion days or guide groups to determine their own discussion schedule. One possibility: Set the first two or three days as reading days, with a discussion to follow; read for two or three more days (plus do some writing about what they’ve read), then discuss again. When students are in the middle of their book, you might have more time devoted to writing than to reading. As they near the end of the book, you can provide time for them to think about and work on extension projects.

- **Focus for reading:** Help your students think about *why* we would want to talk about books with others, and what sorts of insights, details, events, and issues in books make for great conversations. This is easily modeled during your read aloud as you show how readers respond and ask real questions (“Did you hear how the author used that just-right word there? Let’s read that again;” “I wonder why he’s doing that right now... it doesn’t fit what happened earlier.”). Start a list of “Things Worth Mentioning” vs. “Things Worth Discussing” to help students understand the kinds of things that are merely interesting but not discussion provoking, and the kinds of things that will really get a conversation going.

- **Tools to gather information:** Provide simple tools to help your students find and remember what they want to discuss: Open-ended questions, prompts (“I wonder...” “I thought ... because ...”, “I noticed...”), Golden Lines (quotes), or Post-it notes to mark something they want to talk about. Use these tools only as long as you think students need them – when students seem to be able to come up with effective topics for discussion, discontinue this support.

3. *Learning to Discuss*

<http://fac-staff.seattleu.edu/kschlnoe/LitCircles/Discussion/discussion.html>

Having a real conversation about a book doesn’t come naturally to most students. They will need some guidance, modeling, and practice before they begin to internalize the skills of discussion. Some teachers find that roles (Daniels, 1994) provide a valuable – and temporary – structure as students learn to talk with each other. However, roles can also get in the way of a meaningful conversation by constraining what and how students discuss. You can incorporate the scaffolding aspect of roles (e.g., giving students something specific to bring to the discussion) by helping all students find good questions, interesting words, and Golden Lines to share.

Two key elements of learning to discuss: Model a discussion so that students can see what a true conversation looks like and sounds like; and debrief after each discussion to refine students’ understanding and conversational skill.

- **Fishbowl:** A very simple form of modeling in which students carry on a discussion in front of the class. The teacher stops the group at various points to guide the class to articulate what’s working and why. From this experience, students generate guidelines for discussion, which they then practice and refine.

- **Debrief:** After each discussion, ask students two simple questions: What went well? What are you still working on? These questions can be asked during a whole-class debriefing, short session with an individual group following their discussion, as a journal response, or on a form for group response.

4. *Written Response*

<http://fac-staff.seattleu.edu/kschlnoe/LitCircles/WrittenResponse/writtenresponse.html>

Writing can be a good way to clarify what students want to talk about before the discussion, or to capture their response after the discussion. Before discussion, writing can be used to generate topics for the conversation; after discussion, writing can be used for debriefing and goal setting. Here are some simple forms of written response that can be used either before or after discussion:

- **Summarize/Respond:** Divide a piece of paper in half. On the left side, summarize what happened in the segment that you read for discussion using “5 W’s + H” (who, what, when, where, why, and how). On the right side, respond: What did you think, feel, wonder?
- **Golden Lines:** Capture provocative quotes or interesting words.
- **Theme Response:** Answer open-ended questions related to the theme: What is the issue with courage that your characters are facing right now? How is your character dealing with adversity?
- **Letter to Character:** Write from the perspective of one character to another. Or write from your own perspective to a character.

5. *Extending Response through the Arts*

<http://fac-staff.seattleu.edu/kschlnoe/LitCircles/Extension/extension.html>

Although this is not necessarily a requirement of literature circles, guiding students to extend their experience with the book by using various art forms helps many students deepen their understanding and response. A worthwhile extension project grows naturally out of the literature, encourages students to thoughtfully reexamine text, demonstrates something the reader has gained from the book, uses diverse forms of response to explore meaning, and enhances readers’ appreciation and understanding of the book.

- **Focus Questions:** As you plan extension projects and guide students through them, keep these questions in mind: *How does the project show what I have learned about the book? How does the project show something important about the book? When someone views the project, what will they learn about the book?*
- **Examples:** Bookmark, main idea belt, story quilt, literary weaving.

Literature Circles Resources

Literature Circles in Middle School: One Teacher's Journey by Bonnie Campbell Hill, Katherine L. Schlick Noe, & Janine A. King. (2003). Christopher-Gordon Publishers, Inc.

Literature Circles Resource Guide by Bonnie Campbell Hill, Katherine L. Schlick Noe, and Nancy J. Johnson (2001). Christopher-Gordon Publishers, Inc.

Yuyi Morales

www.yuyimorales.com

Cosechando Esperanza: La Historia de César Chávez. Written by Kathleen Krull; illustrated by Yuyi Morales. Translated by F. Isabel Campoy and Alma Flor Ada. Libros Viajeron Harcourt 2003.

Harvesting Hope: The Story of Cesar Chavez. Written by Kathleen Krull; illustrated by Yuyi Morales. Harcourt 2003.

Just a Minute: A Trickster Tale and Counting Book. Written and illustrated by Yuyi Morales. Chronicle Books 2003.

Sand Sister. Written by Amanda White,; illustrated by Yuyi Morales. Barefoot Books 2004.

Deborah Ellis

The Breadwinner. Groundwood Books 2000.

A Company of Fools. Fitzhenry & Whiteside 2002.

The Heaven Shop. Fitzhenry & Whiteside 2004.

Looking for X. Groundwood Books 1999.

Our Stories, Our Songs: African Children Talk about AIDS. Fitzhenry & Whiteside (coming soon).

Mud City. Groundwood Books 2003.

Parvana's Journey. Groundwood Books 2002.

Three Wishes: Palestinian and Israeli Children Speak. Groundwood Books 2004.

Women of the Afghan War. Prager Publishers 2000.

Women for Women in Afghanistan <http://www.w4wafghan.ca/>