

Literature Circles for Adolescent Developmental Readers

This study introduced developmental adolescent readers to literature circles to balance literacy instruction based on students' needs.

“I

hate this book!”

“Wait! What if we don’t finish reading by the deadline?”

“Ugh. This is going to take me hours to read, and I don’t understand most of it!”

These are just some of the common complaints heard in a traditional English classroom. The teacher explains a common reading project, provides a due date, and then prompts students to read, requiring participation in discussions, reading logs, or some other check-in assignment periodically. As the frustration builds, students become complacent and zip through their books with little motivation or interest. The students turn in their projects and cross off another to-do item from their growing lists.

Meanwhile, in the classroom down the hall, Sue leans over and grabs Courtney’s arm while pointing to a line in the dog-eared novel she’s reading. Courtney, wide-eyed, responds by trying to find the line in her copy of the novel. In other corners of the classroom, students are actively engrossed in silent reading or partner activities. The teacher is listening to dialogue between two students trying to convince each other that the main character is really not who he claims to be. Students are engaged, enthusiastic, and eager to share their ideas about their books with their peers. They lead thoughtful discussions, ask powerful questions, and make meaningful connections while the teacher circulates, listens, and encourages. Why are these classrooms so vastly different? Do we have to lament the perceived dichotomy between whole-class,

teacher-facilitated literature instruction and more social, student-managed reading?

As well-intentioned as teachers are in developing activities that try to help broaden students’ cultural experience and to incorporate the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) idea of text complexity, these experiences could be balanced by including opportunities for students to develop strategies through relevant texts of their own choice, which students usually find more rewarding. As Jeffrey Wilhelm and Michael Smith explain in an interview, “We think that our data clearly establishes that young people are doing sophisticated intellectual work in their pleasure reading—much of it is just the kind of work that the CCSS calls for, so making pleasure more central to our practice is not in conflict with working to achieve the CCSS. We think both goals can be achieved if teachers value interpretive complexity as much as they do textual complexity” (Ferlazzo). Interpretive complexity, as defined by Wilhelm, is “what the reader is doing with the text” (46). In both classroom scenarios above, students are participating in reading rich text; however, in the first classroom, the teacher is focusing more on textual complexity and seems less attentive to the collaborative, social elements of learning. The teacher in the second classroom has established a challenging learning environment by using rich text that students have determined to be relevant and engaging for their own purposes. As Karla J. Möller explains, “An increasing number of studies advocate that students who struggle with text-based aspects of reading be given access

to engaging literature and opportunities for richly-layered interpretive response” (426). Providing students with the option to choose accessible novels to read, discuss, and connect with helps them experience the world of literacy as well as explore their own world in a way that most developmental students have not done before.

One viable option to the challenge that English language arts teachers face when attempting to balance teacher-selected text with teacher-guided, student-selected text is literature circles. Harvey Daniels, one of the initial architects of student book discussion groups, points out that “lit circles are essentially well-structured collaborative learning applied to reading” (13). The book discussions format has been implemented, adapted, and refined at all educational levels, but the bottom line is that when students choose their own texts (albeit, with teacher guidance), they are more motivated to interact with the text and their peers and to find more pleasure in their reading experience than with the “typical teacher-chosen whole-class book, which is by definition too hard or too boring or too easy” (Daniels 11). Importantly, this social interaction and collaboration can motivate students and can develop discussion skills around the text, enabling them to become active participants as they search for meaning, strengthen their comprehension, and communicate effectively. Literature circles, then, seem to be a means to scaffold, differentiate, and motivate all learners—even the most reluctant and struggling readers (Moeller and Moeller 1–2). Constructing meaning through interaction with peers, often without the teacher watching or actively participating, can be challenging for developmental students; however, expectations for success, explanations and models of behavior and activities, and the right mix of students will foster positive relationships and promote respectful, responsible group dynamics.

At Holly High School in Holly, Michigan, ninth graders with reading difficulties are placed in a course called Reading Lab, which replaces their traditional English 9 course. At the end of eighth grade, all students take a reading comprehension test—either Degrees of Reading Power (DRP) or Gates MacGinitie Reading Test. In addition, the high school administration reviews students’ scores from state tests such as EXPLORE, middle school grades, and teacher comments to determine placement.

Quite simply, the purpose of Reading Lab is to provide these developmental readers with targeted instruction of the reading and writing strategies and speaking skills needed to succeed not only in their future English language arts classes but also in their other high school courses. Students learn how to be purposeful readers, recognizing that good readers apply a wide range of strategies to unpack a text. The instructors place an emphasis on metacognition, helping students recognize when their comprehension is breaking down and how they can repair it.

Planning Literature Circles

In mid-fall 2014, we reflected on the design of Reading Lab and realized we had been focusing heavily on requiring students to apply reading strategies to teacher-selected texts—fiction and nonfiction. Even though students were successful with these guided activities, we felt our instruction was unbalanced. The teacher-directed instruction, for example, did not focus on extensive collaboration between peers, seeming to perpetuate dependence on the teacher for creating meaning in a text. Furthermore, students still exhibited weak expressive skills and low motivation; so, to remedy these issues, we discussed using literature circles. Reading Lab students had never participated in a literature circles unit; instead, they had independently selected young adult novels. While the independent reading unit did provide student choice, it did not allow students to share authentically in peer conversation, which prevented them from developing discussion strategies needed to strengthen their comprehension. It seemed logical, then, that literature circles would be an effective activity for students to practice using reading strategies to engage in choice material, learn to provide textual evidence to support their thinking, and actively participate in peer book discussions in a collaborative learning environment.

We began the literature circles journey by administering a pretest (DRP) and by explaining to students the design and purpose of our new unit. To learn more about students’ genre and topic interests, we distributed a questionnaire. Using the questionnaires and students’ Lexile ranges, we selected young adult novels and then conducted book talks. Afterward, students recorded their top choices on a notecard, which we collected and used to organize

groups based on common choices and on common Lexile ranges. We modeled how students should complete their role sheets, detailing how each role emphasizes specific, previously introduced reading strategies to aid comprehension (see Figure 1).

We encouraged students to apply reading strategies on sticky notes to make their thinking visible. This metacognitive awareness would prompt students to think critically about their role sheets, the foundation of their small-group discussions. Additionally, this visible thinking would allow us to see snapshots of their reading process.

Over the next several weeks, students read silently every day, and we conferred with them

individually about their reading. For instance, we asked students to summarize what they had read, clarified any questions that they had, and inquired about any connections they could make or favorite parts they could share. This individual reading time established the foundation for what students could contribute during their literature circles discussions. We summarized the procedures that we used to implement the literature circles in Figure 2.

Because we knew that some of our less-developed students would need continued scaffolding, we chose to implement both student-centered and teacher-guided literature discussions. In the student-centered group, our goal was to observe student interaction with little interruption to support their emerging expressive skills. By contrast, in the teacher-guided circles, we played a more active role in the discussions, posing direct questions and sometimes adding our own perspectives of the text. In doing so, we were able to model active listening, encourage accountable talk, and advance the conversation when needed. In both types of discussions, students were expected to complete a role sheet to use as a foundation for their interactions with each other. We alternated which group we observed to eliminate bias and to ensure that our subsequent facilitated conversations with students were similar. Figure 3 describes the roles of the teacher for both student-centered and teacher-guided groups.

FIGURE 1. Role Sheet Strategies

Role Sheet	Reading Strategies
Discussion Director	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Predict • Note Confusions • Ask Questions • Monitor Comprehension • Draw Conclusions • Make Connections
Art Director	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visualize • Clarify • Draw Conclusions • Determine Importance
Word Wizard	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask Questions • Note Confusions • Make Inferences • Draw Conclusions • Clarify • Determine Importance • Analyze Author's Craft • Monitor Comprehension • Analyze Author's Tone/Diction
Passage Master	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make Inferences • Draw Conclusions • Analyze Author's Craft • Determine Importance • Make Connections • Comment on Surprising Information
Character Captain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make Inferences • Draw Conclusions • Make Connections • Clarify • Analyze Author's Tone/Diction • Comment on Surprising Information
Summary Supervisor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarify • Determine Importance • Note Main Idea • Summarize • Synthesize

What the Data Told Us

Our objectives during our action research included having students practice reading strategies, construct meaning of a student-selected text through social interaction, and participate in authentic conversation that reflected their understanding and, hopefully, their excitement about reading. Specifically, we wanted to encourage a genuine conversation rather than a mechanical one strictly revolving around students reading their role sheets to each other. We also wanted students to gain experience providing textual evidence to support their understanding. We noticed that in the student-centered literature circles, students were not only able to share their role sheets, but also they were able to carry most of the conversation, although at times superficially, with the teacher only serving as a facilitator to ensure that the discussion did not digress

FIGURE 2. Literature Circles Procedures

	Teacher	Students
Step 1: Intro	Explained the purpose of literature circles and gave book talks	Listened to the book talks and recorded their top choices on a notecard
Step 2: Book Selection	Reviewed the notecards and put students into appropriate groups Provided the group discussion dates and modeled how students should collaborate with their peers	Divided their books into four sections to match the discussion dates Listed each group member's name next to the appropriate role for each meeting
Step 3: Role Sheets	Modeled how to interact with their texts to complete role sheets	Practiced role sheets with a previously read short story
Step 4: Independent Practice	Provided sustained silent reading time Individually conferenced to gauge understanding	Read silently while making their reading strategies visible on sticky notes
Step 5: Collaboration	Monitored students' engagement, noting their insights, use of textual evidence, and contributions Alternated roles: observer or group participant (facilitator)	Practiced academic vocabulary Used each other's ideas to advance their thinking and to engage in a meaningful conversation

FIGURE 3. Teacher Roles

	Student-Centered Literature Circles	Teacher-Guided Literature Circles
Teacher's Roles	We observed and took notes on the "student talk." We redirected, if needed, to ensure that the conversation did not go wayward. We prompted students if discussion waned.	We actively participated in discussion, sometimes initiating questions or adding our opinions. We expanded on and clarified student ideas, making it a goal to include every student.

too drastically from the text. The following transcription illustrates how students collaboratively constructed meaning using *Acceleration* by Graham McNamee in a student-centered literature circle.

Sammy: Do you think the characters will still be friends after everything that has happened?

John: Yeah, I do.

Sammy: Why do you say that? [probing for deeper understanding]

John: I just think that everyone will still stay strong.

Roy: I actually don't think they're going to be friends because too much has happened. Well, do you think they're going to find out who did the crime?

Sammy: Yeah, I mean maybe they'll use DNA.

This dialogue reveals that the students were able to make predictions and inferences about the text. This student-centered dialogue is basic—not thorough or deep—yet these developmental readers are learning how to contribute in a focused, purposeful manner. With more practice, these developing readers will strengthen their speaking skills, enabling them to do more sophisticated academic tasks, such as providing textual evidence to defend their inferences.

On the other hand, we offered students more scaffolding in the teacher-guided literature circles. Some of the developmental students usually choose not to engage in traditional classroom conversation; some have speech and language impairments documented in their IEPs, so the small-group discussions are a way for students to participate more confidently without the stress of a whole class

watching and listening. For example, we sometimes started the conversation by directing students to think about their previous discussion and what decisions the main character makes in this section of the reading or what an author's purpose or message might be in writing the novel. The following transcription presents how the teacher mediated the students' meaning-making process in the novel *Boot Camp* by Todd Strasser.

[The group was asked to begin their discussion with a short summary of the section they read for today's meeting. Hannah used her role sheet to summarize.]

Instructor: Thanks, Hannah. Garrett, you said something while she was talking; you mentioned something about respect. Is that the purpose, do you think, that they [parents] were sending their kids to the camp? To learn respect?

Chad: I don't think, well, I think it is, but it isn't. They can send their kids there for different reasons. Like, getting in trouble or doing drugs.

Instructor: Fred, what were you going to add?

Fred: Just like in the story when it said [points to page in novel] that Pauly wasn't supposed to be there . . . his father just didn't want him to be like that. [inaudible] It wasn't for discipline or anything. Parents who don't want their kids to be a certain way.

Instructor: So, let's talk more about Pauly for a second. Who was character captain? Remind me why Pauly was there? Fred was alluding to this.

Garrett: 'Cause Pauly wasn't the son his father wanted. He wanted a big bulky jock; and Pauly was a little nerdy.

Instructor: So are you saying that his dad sent him there [the camp] because he really didn't know what to do with who Pauly really was?

Fred: [nods] Yea, not for discipline.

In this discussion, the instructor provides the prompting and redirecting needed to expand students' thinking and to create opportunities to explore, question, and evaluate. Yes, the

teacher-guided dialogue seems more detailed than the student-centered dialogue, yet this does not mean that one approach is more effective than the other; each approach achieves the same goal—creating and communicating meaning through social interaction—but through slightly different strategies. As students practice, gain confidence, and expand their skill sets, teachers can gradually minimize their interaction, encouraging students to use metacognitive strategies when learning tasks become difficult and comprehension breaks down.

What We Learned from the Data


Certainly, the literature circles addressed the goals that we set: practice reading strategies with choice novels, collaborate to make meaning of the text, and use textual evidence to support the conversation. Of the 35 students who took the post-DRP test, 29 experienced an increase in their comprehension scores. This suggests that through self-selected novels and collaborative opportunities to discuss and defend their ideas, students will become more strategic readers, thus increasing their comprehension. Through a sophisticated software analysis (Statistical Package for the Social Science), we discovered there was no statistical difference in the comprehension gains between the student-centered literature circles and the teacher-guided literature circles. This finding does not illustrate that one approach is necessarily more effective than the other. Rather, each approach provided students with valuable opportunities to strengthen their close reading and discussion skills to enhance comprehension. Most importantly, we learned literature circles *do* have a place in a remedial English language arts classroom; teachers should *not* refrain from implementing literature circles. Some teachers may erroneously believe that (1) young adult literature does not have literary merit; (2) they need to have read every book that they offer as a choice; and (3) the perceived chaos is unproductive. We agree, however, with proponents of literature circles such as Beth Maloch et al., who feel that “[u]nproductive talk, conflicts within groups, and management problems can lead to frustration and premature discontinuation of literature discussion groups” (313), so the teacher's role in setting expectations,

continuing to model accountable discourse, and stepping in to facilitate groups who are struggling will strengthen the literature circle experience. We feel that it is important for students to have some choice, read books within their independent levels, and talk with their peers to generate meaning and to practice using academic vocabulary. We argue that because of their design, literature circles empower students by strengthening their analytical and interpersonal skills.

In an ideal setting, we would have set aside more time for the literature circles unit. Because of snow days and the trimester schedule, however, we were limited to approximately three weeks. With more time, we could have individually conferred more frequently with students, provided more mini-lessons, and allowed more in-class reading time. When planning a literature circles unit, especially for developing readers, teachers should schedule ample time so that students can immerse themselves in a rich literacy environment where they develop reading stamina and are encouraged to discuss the texts with their peers. If possible, we recommend working with another teacher or a literacy specialist to implement literature circles, at least on discussion days to efficiently monitor group discussions. Our teamwork, for example, afforded us many learning opportunities: we could closely monitor the small groups and encourage the students' accountable talk; we could discuss our observations to gain a better understanding of developing readers' needs; we could exchange ideas about how to use class time to implement our best practices. A classroom teacher has good insights regarding student dynamics, and a literacy specialist can offer specific content-area strategies, as well as an outside perspective, to help improve students' academic behaviors.

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Conclusion

Today's students are held to more rigorous standards; they must engage in higher-order thinking, defend their ideas with textual evidence, and communicate clearly and logically with their peers. While some critics of the CCSS may argue that the standards neglect developing students, the truth is that teachers have opportunities to scaffold students' understanding as they work toward including texts with higher complexity. Literature circles, however teachers choose to implement them, can help mitigate students' reading troubles, providing an inviting—yet appropriately challenging—environment. In the end, we recommend that teachers carefully consider their students' needs to determine if student-centered literature circles and/or teacher-guided literature circles could be an effective instructional strategy to improve reading abilities. 

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

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Students interact with a range of different kinds of texts in the classroom, but for many, films and movies are the favorite. Because of their interest in the films, projects related to these movie texts often result in a higher level of engagement. Capture this enthusiasm, and transfer it to reading and literature by substituting film production roles for the traditional literature circle roles in this lesson plan from ReadWriteThink.org. After reviewing film production roles—such as director, casting director, and set designer—students work together in cooperative groups to read and discuss a piece of literature, each assuming a film production role. <http://bit.ly/2ntDouT>