The Reading Connection

By Jordan Fabish

BETTER THAN A BOOK REPORT

OK, you are committed to bringing the theory of your study to the practice of your teaching. You have made a silent promise to challenge both your quick and your slow students with Bloom’s higher levels of thinking. You intend to balance teaching all the elements of proficient reading within the context of “good, rich literature.” (Can’t you just hear Dr. Bishop saying it?) You believed Dr. Schipper’s (570) pronouncement that whatever one wants to teach—the short u sound, sight words, setting, great introductions—one can teach with literature. You took to heart a line from an R.E.G. presentation by Dr. Guillaume, “We need to create forums for talking.” Now what?

There is an activity that accomplishes “all of the above”: our most valued theory is put into practice; shy students speak up; ones who rarely do their homework come prepared; strong students model leadership; those who often miss the point at even a factual level do work that reflects analysis and application; and in this forum, while looking carefully at language, vocabulary, plot, and important ideas, everyone seems to be having a great time discussing . . . the literature! What is this activity? It is literature circles.

Appropriate for any age and developmental level, infinitely adaptable to your class’s needs, is an activity called literature circles (LC). In this article I will offer general information about this activity, the resources to try it yourself, and a bit of my own experience using LC at the community college level.

If you receive The California Reader, then you have seen not one, but two LC articles in the fall 2001 edition—“A Second Look at Literature Circles,” Betsy Suits, and “Is Kansas in Black and White? A Recipe for Literature Circles,” Cathy Calcagno. (You will probably want to read them after the lead feature, “Honoring All Children: Diverse Pathways to Literacy” by CSUF’S own Ruth and Hallie Yopp.) Using literature circles in her first- and second-grade classrooms, Suits, reports on the effectiveness of heterogeneous diverse groups, the strengthening and internalization of student comprehension, and the creativity and initiative her students demonstrated. If you are currently using literature circles, these accounts will both encourage you and expand your vision for success with them.

If, however, you are unfamiliar with literature circles, but interested in exploring them, you will want to start with Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom by Harvey Daniels (1994). Warning! When I read it as a textbook in my 570 class, Daniels’ breathless, too-personal, diary style struck me as unprofessional and self-aggrandizing. You may be similarly off-put, but keep reading; the concept has worked so well for me and my students that I now just accept and enjoy his friendly rhetoric. Besides, within this work are impressive theoretical foundations for literature circles from Rosenblatt’s transformations to Bruner’s scaffolding theory, from Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development to Rogers’ facilitation. All the “good stuff” resides in literature circles. Of course, the book also delivers theoretical debate; detailed descriptions of how it works; plans for a one-hour introduction and a week-long introduction; chapters of “Teachers’ Applications” for younger and for older students, suggestions for record keeping, assessment, and trouble-shooting; and even actual role sheets (a salient component of LC), in English and Spanish, which readers are “entirely welcome to copy” (p. 76) or redesign.

So, then, what are literature circles? “Two potent ideas— independent reading and cooperative learning—come together in the elegant and exciting classroom activity called literature circles: . . . small, temporary discussion groups who have chosen to read the same story, poem, article, or book” (Daniels, p. 12, 13).
To paraphrase Daniels’ list of distinctive features of literature circles, (“not just a trendy label for any kind of small-group reading lesson, [but] a sophisticated fusion of collaborative learning with independent reading, in the framework of reader response theory” [Daniels, p. 17]), the purposes of which are to make meaning and generate respect for the ideas of others by simply learning to have a good discussion, the following are

DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF GENUINE LITERATURE CIRCLES

1. Students choose their own reading materials.
2. Small groups meet on a regular, predictable schedule for discussion.
3. Students use written notes as a guide.
4. Discussion topics come from the students.
5. Meetings aim to be open, natural conversations about books, so personal connections, digressions, and open-ended questions are welcome.
6. Students play a rotating assortment of task roles.
7. Teacher=facilitator, not member or instructor.
8. Assessment is via teacher observation and student self-evaluation.
9. It is fun—and it’s supposed to be!

The rotating roles are a key ingredient because the spirit of adventure and creativity are encouraged while order and cooperation are maintained, thus balancing learning-style preferences. These roles are a telling sample of Bloom’s taxonomy as the Summarizer and Vocabulary Enricher demonstrate knowledge and comprehension, the Literary Luminary analyzes, the Connector synthesizes, and as the Discussion Director does a little of every level, while asking open-ended questions and leading the whole group toward evaluation. For background information on the chosen book, there is an Investigator. A book with frequent scene changes can employ a Travel Tracer. The Illustrator brings a visual representation of understanding to the group. You and the students tailor the roles to the class and to the literature.

Sound good? If you still feel vague about just how it all might work out with real students, that is just how I felt the first time I tried it, and, in fact, how I feel every time. Just a few semesters into teaching reading, I still consider myself new, but when I was very new, another CSUF reading program graduate, Jan Lee, and I faced our first “real” reading class at a community college. The class was titled “Reading Rate and Efficiency,” a stopwatch and timed drills standard teaching tools. Although the reading coordinator was happy for us to apply our masters-program theory to enrich these students’ reading lives with literature, we sure wondered how. We did it with literature circles.

Our student population was typical of community college reading classes—students who scored poorly on the entrance assessment for any number of reasons: bright students who just needed familiarity with academic protocol or with the English language; underachieving students who had “fallen through the cracks” in earlier years, leaving huge hole in their academic competence; students with mental and physical disabilities severely slowing their progress; students eager to learn and, conversely, those who really resented being there. Probably like yours; or, probably like yours, just older. We anxiously imagined presenting these students with the LC experiment, and their looking at us and at one another with flat expressions. Truthfully, sometimes you do get a “flat” group, but mostly . . . IT WORKED! Mostly, it continues to work! Low-achievers, rarely participating in discussions or fully completing their assignments, blossom in literature circles; more capable students find a safe venue to practice leadership. Last week I walked through literature circles in my classes and heard students earnestly debating a character’s motivation, sorting out a plot confusion, appreciating the author’s style as someone read aloud, and appreciating their peers’ preparation with “Oh, cool,” or “Good question!” I am still amazed.

Since that first, fearful beginning, Jan Lee has established a growing private tutoring business and also assists in the CSUF Reading Clinic, while I have stayed in the community college classroom and continue to employ literature circles at all levels. Now here is my confession: for all my brave talk, my literature circles have never been “genuine”; I have always chosen the book—one book that we study in three ways during the whole semester, but that “works,” too. Literature circles fizzle if people don’t read the book.
Thus, with a literature-circles end in mind (at least in my mind), we start with an aesthetic stance, reading to form emotional connections with the characters and a feeling for the author’s style, writing a response journal. Then we spend several weeks in more-conventional efferent study, clarifying events and building vocabulary, finishing with an objective test. By then, these students whom I see only once or twice a week and who may never have read a book in their lives are familiar enough with the chosen work to succeed in literature circles. Their success in this academic pursuit is my true goal, and because I sense this close and multi-faceted association with quality literature is one reason they do succeed, I keep mentally trying out ways to retain extensive whole-class preparation but offer authentic choice. I think I will get there. How about you? Come January, you just might want to get the book and give literature circles a whirl.

Opening this article I mentioned Reading 570 and Dr. Beth Schipper, and because ending this article I have turned to the also aforementioned personal (I hope not too), diary style (I hope not breathless), I wish to document a few things. Namely, it was Dr. Schipper who introduced many of us to Literature Circles: Voice and Choice . . . , she who set up a field trip to observe Marcy Fry’s elementary class “doing” literature circles, and she who often said, “Trust the literature.” Thank you, Dr. Schipper.


Faculty Footnotes

By Kathi Bartle Angus

The Reading Program is delighted to welcome Drs. Tony and Ula Manzo to the faculty. Manzo and Manzo are very familiar names to the reading community. Dr. Anthony (Tony) Manzo received his undergraduate degree from St. John’s University, his Masters degree from Hofstra University, and his doctorate from Syracuse University. Dr. Manzo comes to the Cal State Fullerton Reading Program from the University of Missouri-Kansas City, where he served as professor of Literacy Education, director of the Center for Studies in Higher-Order Literacy, and coordinator of the university-wide interdisciplinary Ph.D. program. Dr. Manzo is the 1993 recipient of the International Reading Association’s Citation of Merit for research and impact on the field of literacy education. He developed a number of practical teaching methods that are widely used in literacy instruction today. He has served as an invited member on national level committees for literacy-related policy development, and as an invited consultant to university faculty groups across the country. His current research interests center around development of web-based open architectures to facilitate collaborative problem-solving on literacy-related projects such as concept development, critical/creative reading and writing, differential diagnosis, and entrepreneurial literacy. Dr. Manzo is primary author of textbooks on beginning literacy, content area literacy, and literacy diagnosis and remediation, and an individually administered diagnostic inventory for evaluating basic and higher-order literacy. His research has been published in professional journals of literacy, leadership, and learning disabilities education, and his research-based methods have been widely reprinted in textbooks for teacher education. Dr. Manzo’s primary responsibility will be development and instruction of Read 516, Testing and Evaluation of Reading Performance.

Dr. Ula Manzo received her undergraduate degree from Park College, and her Masters and doctorate from the University of Missouri-Kansas City. She has served on the reading education faculty of Northwest Missouri State University and Central Missouri State University, and in the central office Curriculum department of the School District of Kansas City, Missouri. Dr. Manzo currently serves in the
department of Elementary, Bilingual and Reading Education, teaching secondary/college reading courses and elementary reading courses. Primary research interests include refinement of interactive teaching methodology to enhance active learning of concept vocabulary and reading comprehension, and theoretical bases and practical techniques for evaluation of basic and higher-order literacy. She has co-authored, with Dr. Anthony Manzo, textbooks on beginning literacy, content area literacy, and literacy diagnosis and remediation, and an individually administered diagnostic inventory for evaluating basic and higher-order literacy. Other areas of research have been published in the Journal of Reading, the Reading Teacher, the Journal of Reading Research and Instruction, and Reading Psychology, and she presented at professional conferences in the US and abroad. Read 507, Current Trends in Secondary/College Reading will be the main focus for Dr. Manzo.

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If you would like to contribute to the newsletter, by being a regular column writer or just an occasional article donator, please contact Jan Bagwell at jbagwell@fullerton.edu. We need all of you to help make REG great!