

Using Literature Circles in a Scripted Reading Program: A Self-Study

Cheryl L. Kanuckle

Devonshire Alternative Elementary, Columbus Public Schools

Keywords

literature circles, scripted instruction

Abstract

Scripted reading programs provide students with reading material that is on their grade level, however student interests are neglected. LACES is a Columbus Public Schools' scripted reading program that consists of a two hour uninterrupted block of time devoted to teaching reading and writing. The program uses basal readers for students to read and practice comprehension strategies, fluency, and decoding skills within a whole class context. This self-study is an exploration of ways to integrate literature circles into a scripted reading program. Methods of data collection included student observations, teacher diary entries, student reading attitude surveys, and teacher observations.

Table of Contents

Using Literature Circles in a Scripted Reading Program: A Self-Study	1
Life in a Scripted Reading Classroom	2
My Classroom.....	4
Introducing Literature Circles into My Reading Block	5
Procedures.....	7
Reactions.....	9
Student Reactions.....	9
My Reactions	9
Where Will I Go From Here?	10
Works Cited	11

Life in a Scripted Reading Classroom

Imagine that you are a third grade student learning to read in a school that uses a scripted reading program. You would be participating in a lesson like the one below:

Text Vocabulary

Say: We will review some vocabulary words before reading our story. Let's read this paragraph together. The underlined words will be in today's selection and knowing their meanings will help us understand the story better.
nervous postcards allowance yawn anchovies

Write the following paragraph on the board and introduce the vocabulary in context. Discuss the meanings of the underlined words.

At first, I was nervous about going on vacation because I had never flown on an airplane before. It turned out to be lots of fun. Sometimes we had to yawn when our ears got plugged up. Our trip was great! We used our allowances to buy T-shirts and pizza with anchovies. We also sent postcards to our friends so they could see where we went on our vacation.

Building Background

Say: Today we will read a story called *Amber Brown is Not a Crayon*. One name of a brownish-yellow crayon is amber brown. The character Amber Brown has a name that sounds like a crayon.

Say: In this story, Amber's best friend Justin is getting ready to move. How would you feel if your best friend moved?

Allow students to share responses.

Explicit Instruction/Modeling

Say: Today we will make inferences. When you make an inference, you read all of the clues in the story and your own personal knowledge to draw a conclusion. Let me show you an example.
Display Making Inferences overhead. Read the paragraph to students.

Say: From the paragraph, I can infer that Malik and Kim have been in a fight. The clues are that: 1. Their faces are smeared with dirt. 2. We know that they were angry with each other because Malik sneered at Kim and she returned an angry glare. 3. As their teacher left the office, they could not look her in the eye.

Say: I used those three clues to make my inference. Also, as a teacher, I know that students are often sent to the principal's office after a fight.

Guided Practice

Say: Turn to page 191 in your books. I will read this page as you follow along. *Read page 191 aloud as students follow along.*

Say: This page ends with a question: "Will they make up?" Let's make an inference. Remember that when we make an inference, we use the clues from the story and our own personal knowledge to draw a conclusion.

Say: I think Amber and Justin will make up. The clue that helps me draw this conclusion is that they have been friends since preschool.

Say: Let's continue reading on page 192. After we read this page, I will give you an opportunity to make an inference.
Select students to take turn reading page 192 aloud.

Say: Let's make an inference. Amber and Justin are still not speaking to each other. Do you think they will make up? What clues helped you draw this conclusion? *Allow students to share responses.*

Independent Practice (in pairs).

Say: You will read the rest of the story with a partner. The inference question you will answer one you have completed the story is "Do you think Amber and Justin will keep in touch when he moves? What clues did you use to draw you conclusion?"

As students read independently, circulate around the room to assist where needed. Regroup after the students have finished reading. Listed below are sample discussion questions that you may use to discuss the story.

Say: Now that you have had a chance to read the story, let's talk about what happened. One page 193, Amber made a joke about hating a person named Al Abama. Who is Al Abama? Why do you think she did that? How do Amber and Justin make up? Did you expect that they would? What in the story made you think that they would or would not make up? Has anyone ever had a best friend that has moved away? How did that make you feel?

Conclusion

Say: Readers often figure out things in a story using information they already know along with information the author gives us. This is called making an inference.

I teach in an urban elementary school that uses a scripted reading program. I am expected to follow the script exactly, to have the students read stories from the basal series, and to use whole group instruction. Once I started back to earn my graduate degree at Otterbein, I came to the realization that my teaching philosophy, based on what I had learned about effective reading instruction, did not match my current teaching practices. This posed a real dilemma for me and helped me to shape the framework for the self-study described in this article.

My school, Devonshire Elementary, has some unique characteristics. While the district has 70% of its population receiving free and reduced price lunch, Devonshire, which serves 500 students in grades K-5, is more economically advantaged with only 30% receiving free or reduced school lunches. It is also unusual in that it is an alternative school with a specific theme. This theme (Project Adventure) encourages teachers to focus on experiential education and cooperative learning.

Although Devonshire may have a particular mission, district mandates still apply to instruction. The LACES (Literacy Across Columbus Elementary Schools) Reading Program was adopted by the district. Devonshire was chosen to pilot the program in grades K-1 during the 2003-2004 school year. Each subsequent year, two grade levels were added so that by 2005-2006, all Devonshire students were officially instructed using the LACES reading program.

Scripted reading programs require the teacher to follow a script, word for word. Our district's reading program uses a whole class approach, which means that the students are all reading the same story, at the same time, in the same way. Scripted reading programs and basal reading programs can be somewhat beneficial to the teacher in that students are all reading the same story. Students who are reading the same story can be taught different components of reading at the same time. This uniformity makes lesson planning easy for the teacher and provides consistency across students.

Although uniformity yields consistency, it does not take into account variability among students. Students learn in different ways, through different processes, and through different intelligences. When all students read the same story at the same time applying a highly structured set of strategies, individual needs are ignored or underemphasized. There is a significant body of evidence, including research by Gambrell, Morrow, Neuman, and Pressley, to support the notion that teachers need to attend to individual needs in order to ensure success for all students. In helping students obtain the craft of comprehension, Block (1993 & 1997) states that differentiation of instruction must be included in the reading program.

Critics of highly structured reading programs argue that such an approach is unmotivating to students and teachers alike. Stories in basal readers are often boring. School districts and officials who choose basal readers do so not because they are engaging but because they are the standard approach (Gambrell, Morrow, Neuman & Pressley, 1999). Furthermore, prescriptive teaching methods "deskill teachers by undermining their voice and power" (Gambrell, Morrow, Neuman & Pressley, 1999, p.143).

My graduate courses emphasized the important role that motivation plays in becoming a reader. Active learners are more likely to gain meaning from text. Motivating classroom activities and materials encourage students to construct meaning, to develop their metacognitive abilities, and to see that reading serves authentic purposes. Teachers need to create contexts that empower students. Farstrup and Samuels (2002) found that teachers who create classrooms that encourage profound engagement do so by using "pro-learning, pro-reading, pro-writing discourse" (p. 31). They further state that there are two ways in which teachers achieve this. One is through setting expectations and the second is through giving students the opportunity to engage during learning.

Turner and Paris (1995) suggest that teachers must allow students to participate in open-ended activities where students have some degree of control. They state that students need to be allowed to make personal choices. Choice is a motivator. Students who have choice exert more effort in learning and work harder to understand what they are reading (Schiefele, 1991). Turner and Paris suggest that students "are more likely to use summarizing strategies rather than shortcuts like memorizing, copying, or guessing" (Turner & Paris, p. 664). When choice drives reading instruction, the burden of teacher direction is lifted, and students take control over their own learning. Giving students the opportunity to make choices also gives them the power to set their own goals. "Students learn to behave like readers by exercising choice" (Rasinski & Padak, 2000, p. 28).

My Classroom

My 2006-2007 third grade reading class was composed of ten boys and eleven girls, all of whom were reading on level. The Dominic Reading Assessment was used to determine the students' comprehension ability, as well as their fluency. Based on this assessment, the students were adequate readers. However, based on my classroom observations during reading instruction, the students were not motivated to read. The lack of student participation during reading instruction, the quietness of the classroom during conversations between students about what they were reading, and the unclear understanding of the purpose of reading, prompted me to examine what was causing the students unenthusiastic approach to reading. It was clear to me that although students could read, they were bored by the stories in the required text. Research article after research article (Seifert, 2004; Sweet, Guthrie & Ng, 1996; Turner & Paris, 1995) that I read for my graduate courses indicated that the way to motivate students to read is to allow them to read what they are interested in. It seemed so obvious. Interest leads students to want to read more and in turn helps them to become better readers. I asked myself: What can I do within the parameters of a scripted reading program to motivate my students and to give them a sense of ownership over their own learning?

It was clear to me that although students could read, they were bored by the stories in the required text.

First, I had to look at ways to carve out time from the block schedule required by LACES:

Segment Number	Time Allotted for Segment	Activity
1	25 minutes	Vocabulary building, decoding concepts, and spelling patterns
2	30 minutes	Reading and comprehension
3	15 minutes	Teacher read aloud
4	20 minutes	Intervention/Extension: small group work to intervene on a concept not understood, or group work on an extension project.

Introducing Literature Circles into My Reading Block

Could I find a way to encourage choice through literature circles during the last segment of my reading block? I had read about literature circles and wanted to try them out. Harvey Daniels (2002), one of the leading proponents of literature circles, identified eleven key features for this type of small group learning:

Eleven Key Ingredients to a Fantastic Literature Circle

1. Students *choose* their own reading materials.
2. *Small temporary groups* are formed, based on book choice.
3. Different groups read *different books*.
4. Groups meet on *a regular, predictable schedule* to discuss their reading.
5. Kids use written or drawn *notes* to guide both their reading and discussion.
6. Discussion *topics come from the students*.
7. Group meetings aim to be *open, natural conversations about books*, so personal connections, digressions, and open-ended questions are welcome.
8. The teacher serves as a *facilitator*, not a group member or instructor.
9. Evaluation is by *teacher observation and student self-evaluation*.
10. A spirit of *playfulness and fun* pervades the room.
11. When books are finished, *readers share with their classmates*, and *then new groups form* around new reading choices.

From *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups* by Harvey Daniels (2002)

I decided to try a two week unit using literature circles during the last segment of my reading block. Time was a critical constraint that could not be changed due to the strict schedule of LACES. Therefore, I had to adapt the concept of literature circles to fit into my schedule. One of the adaptations I had to consider was the length of the text and how this text would impact the constraint of time. I began my search for texts in looking for short chapter books. As I began to read them myself, I realized that, as a third grade student, I would need more than a two week span of time to complete the book. As a teacher, I had to find interesting but short books in order to maximize the time that we had to spend participating in literature circles. I decided to use the fairy tale/folk tale theme with picture books as it met the qualifications I needed to incorporate literature circles into the scripted schedule I had to follow. This theme, along with the length of the stories, seemed like a better fit in my schedule than reading chapter books.

Finding multiple copies of fairy tales or folk tales that would appeal to both boys and girls was a challenge. While my building had a substantial supply of books, there were few complete sets. Although the use of the public library did cross my mind, I wanted to see what other possibilities lay before me since my district was so big. With the assistance of the Gifted and Talented teacher in my building, I was able to locate the books that I needed. I had to delay the start of the unit until another class was finished using them.

The unit was also delayed because of district test requirements. The Dominie Reading Assessment is given to the students every quarter. The test averages thirty minutes per student, which means that it takes one to two weeks to administer. During this testing period, there is no teacher instruction.

Given the delays, I had a lot of time to plan my unit! I wanted to make sure that supplies were accessible to the students so that time would be spent conversing about literature instead of looking for supplies. I had to change the organization of the students' work area. We have tubs that are numbered according to the table where the students sit. These tubs hold the table's pencils, highlighters, folders, and books for silent reading. When considering the supplies the students would need in the literature circles, I added dictionaries, thesauruses, and post-its.



Reading tubs

I also had time to survey my students. I asked the students to respond to a reading interest survey. While I had intended to use the results of this survey to guide book selection, I found that this wasn't feasible. Although I wanted students to have more of a voice in the selection of reading materials, I also had to remain loyal to the curriculum set forth by my district. Therefore, I chose the genre of fairy tales/folk tales but did let the students select which book they wanted to read out of the four choices I provided.

Procedures

To save time, I used the story from the LACES manual to introduce literature circles to my class. I was “killing two birds with one stone” by practicing the literature circle roles and following the schedule of the scripted reading program. Since many experts recommend literature circles for students in grade 4 and above (Morris, 2004), I was concerned about the amount of time my third graders would need to learn how to function in this new structure. I spent one day modeling each job: discussion leader, connection maker, word wizard, and problem solver. The students worked together in their table groups, all completing the same job. After practicing in table groups, we came together as a group and discussed successes and challenges. I posted a sheet for the students to refer to when literature circles began. This sheet identified the job characteristics, types of questions, types of connections, and supplies needed for each job.

Roles of Literature Circles

Discussion Leader- creates various levels of questions to guide their group in a discussion of the passage.

Connection Maker- makes connections between the text you are reading and the same text, other text, the world and yourself.

Word Wizard- looks up new or confusing words in the dictionary, writes the definition according to the usage in the passage, and creates an original sentence using the word.

Problem Solver- identifies conflicts in the story and shows how they are solved.

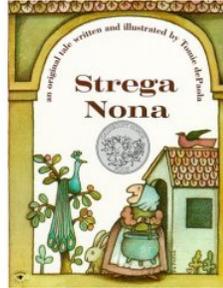
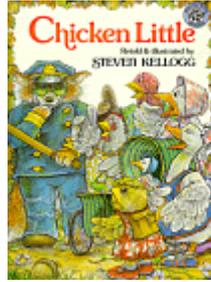
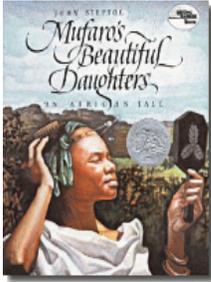
Literature Circles: the way to go and how to get there

The next step I took was to give the students more independence. Instead of everyone in the group completing the same job, each member completed one of four jobs. I gave the students twenty minutes to complete the reading (three pages out of the scheduled story from LACES) and to execute their roles. I used twenty minute increments because the time block for the literature circle during the reading program could only be twenty minutes. I wanted students to feel the length of twenty minutes so they would know how to pace themselves. During my observation, I took note about what jobs were taking the longest to complete and if there were any jobs that needed further explanation. I also allowed discussion time for reflection so that students could share their feelings about the literature circles.

The final step I took was to show the students an actual literature circle in progress. I used a video (Harvey & Goudvis, 2002) that had students working and discussing books in a literature circle format. I wanted my students to see what a good literature circle looked like and sounded like. While the students watched, we discussed what the students were doing in the video that made their circles effective.

I felt that my students were ready to begin with their fairy tale picture book. Before we could begin, I needed to allow the students' time to choose the book that they were interested in reading. I gave a brief book talk on each title, making each summary sound

like a commercial, to get the students interested in the four books. The books were Mufaro's Beautiful Daughter's (1987) by John Steptoe, Chicken Little (1989) by Steven Kellogg, Strega Nona (1999) by Tomie de Paola, and Rumpelstiltskin (1986) by Paul O. Zelinsky. I had the students write down two books that they were interested in reading. I took the lists and created the circles, making sure groups were as heterogeneous as possible and that most students got their first choice.



Before we could begin our first twenty minute session, there were some “behind the scene” tasks that I completed to conserve time. Although these tasks could have been done by the students, I wanted the time students had available to be spent on reading and conversing about literature. I decided to mark the stopping points in each book for each session. This would conserve time in that the students would not have to meet to decide how far to read. This also gave me a little more control of making sure the literature circles were moving at a reasonable pace.

To begin our first session, the circles met briefly for two minutes to assign jobs. This initial meeting also allowed students to see who was in their group. Students then took on their roles and read the first section. I observed that the students who had been assigned the word wizard role were having difficulty finishing their job. I realized that I needed to consider not only the amount of time needed to complete the word wizard task, but also the amount of time available to share the wizard's work with the group. I decided to cut the amount of words in half. All the other jobs seemed to work within the time limit.

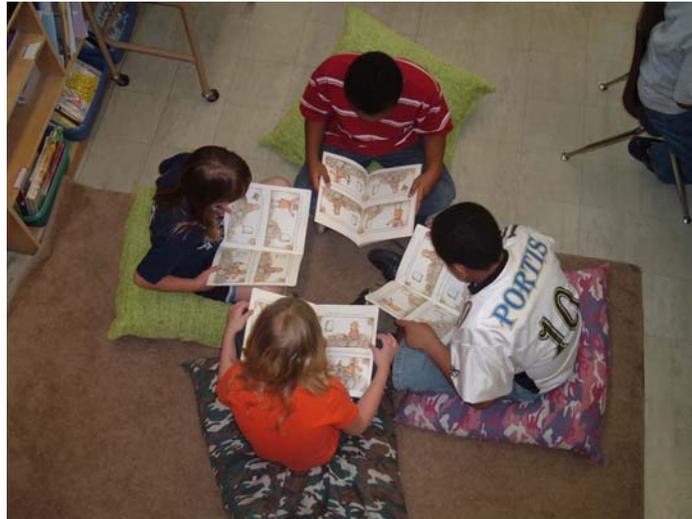
I thought that I would be able to alternate a reading day with a talking day. However, I found that the students needed more than twenty minutes for talking. Therefore, I altered the schedule to one reading day followed by two talking days. This allowed three days per section, and there were two sections in each book. I allotted an additional four days to complete the project in case of unanticipated emergencies and because I wanted the students to reflect on their experience.

Reactions

Student Reactions

Seeing my students' excitement was rewarding to me both as a teacher and as a researcher. After the cycle of reading the first book, students were especially eager to share their story with other members in the class who did not participate in their circle.

Although I had not planned to go further, other than to reflect on the experience, the enthusiasm the students expressed in the tone of their voice as they discussed their circles, encouraged me to use this twenty minute time block for other student driven activities. Students wrote reader's theater scripts of their favorite parts, wrote different endings to their literature circle story, or read the story to the class.



Student reflections were very insightful. I asked the students to write down their likes and dislikes about literature circles. I was thrilled when I saw the overwhelming positive comments. One student said, "What I like about literature circles is that we can learn more because other people might have ideas that you never thought of." It seemed like the students enjoyed the choice of books, the responsibility of jobs, and the conversations in which they participated. One student commented, "Literature circles are fun because we can communicate with each other." The students also gave some critical evaluations of the process. One of the students wrote, "The only thing I don't like about literature circles is that we have to stop reading! I wanted to see how the story ends!"

"Literature Circles are fun because we get to pick our own books and jobs."

"Literature Circles give us responsibility."

My Reactions

The implementation of literature circles into my reading block was a success. As I reflect on the experience, I have developed some theories about why my third graders transitioned from a passive to an active role so easily during the reading block.

At Devonshire, cooperative learning is the foundational learning strategy that students use daily beginning in Kindergarten. Students sit in table groups with supplies that are shared. Students work together on group activities and are encouraged to help one another on individual projects. I feel that this sense of group learning and cooperation played a big role in the success of the literature circle project because group process was a concept that students had already mastered. Cooperative learning was a solid foundation on which to build literature circles.

Good management played an important role in the success of literature circles. Students knew the expectations of the classroom and the activity. Supplies were in convenient, easy to find places so that students could spend more time on task. I feel that if my classroom were disorganized, one in which students do not have clear set boundaries or expectations, that the activity would not have been successful. During the activity there were very few instances where behavior or classroom organization became an issue.

Where Will I Go From Here?

Being able to integrate Literature Circles into the scripted reading program helped me to realize that I still have some degree of control over what happens in my classroom. When I started with LACES, I felt as if I were a robot blindly following a program that did not mesh with my philosophy of teaching. I realize now that I have to continue to find avenues in any curriculum that both align with the district's plans for success and allow me to act on my own philosophy of teaching. I proved to myself that my beliefs can be intertwined with district mandates.

My students' excitement illustrates that choice increases motivation, and motivation leads to enthusiastic readers.

I will continue to use literature circles. My students' excitement illustrates that choice increases motivation, and motivation leads to enthusiastic readers. As I look toward next year, I plan to introduce literature circles earlier in the year. Since I will have a split class (with two different grade levels), I can use these circles as a way to address the needs and interests of an even wider range of students. Instead of feeling as if there is one teacher and many students, I can use the students themselves as teachers.

I have learned quite a bit about myself across the project. My resentment toward the scripted reading program is a bit less pronounced. I have found that I can be creative. I just have to "read between the lines" and find the places and spaces in the school day where students have a choice and where teachers can make a difference.

Works Cited

- Block, C. C. (1993). Strategy instruction in a literature based reading program. *Elementary School Journal*, 72, 139-149.
- Block, C. C. (1997). *Literacy difficulties: Diagnosis and instruction*. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace.
- Columbus Public Schools. (2005). *Literacy Across Columbus Elementary Schools, June, 2005*. Columbus Public Schools: Author.
- Daniels, H. (2002). *Literature circles: Voice and choice in book clubs & reading groups*. Portland, Maine: Stenhouse Publishers.
- De Paola, T. (1975). *Strega nona*. New York: Simon & Schuster Inc.
- Farstrup, A. E. & Samuels, S. J. (Eds.) (2002). *What research has to say about reading instruction*. Delaware: International Reading Association.
- Gambrell, L. B., Morrow, L. M., Neuman, S. B., & Pressely, M. (Eds.). (1999). *Best practices in literacy instruction*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Harvey, S., & Goudvis, A. (2002). *Strategy: Instruction in action. (Tape 4)* Portland: Stenhouse Publishers.
- Kellog, S. (1989). *Chicken little*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Morris, B., & Perlenfein, D. (2003). *Literature circles: The way to go and how to get there*. Westminster, California: Teacher Created Materials.
- Rasinski, T., & Padak, N. (2000). *Effective reading strategies: Teaching children who find reading difficult*. (2nd ed.). New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
- Scheifele, U. (1991). Interest, learning, and motivation. *Educational Psychologist*, 26, 299-323.
- Seifert, T.L. (2004). Understanding student motivation. *Educational Research*, 46, 137-149.
- Steptoe, J. (1987). *Mufaro's beautiful daughters*. New York: Scholastic Inc.
- Sweet, A.P., Guthrie, J.T., & Ng, M.N. (1996). *Teacher's perceptions and students' literacy motivations*. Washington, D.C: National Reading Research Center. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. 402554)

Turner, J., & Paris, S. (1995). How literacy tasks influence children's motivation for literacy. *The Reading Teacher*, 48, 662-673.

Wilson, L. (2002). *Reading to live: How to teach reading for today's world*. Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann.

Zelinsky, P.O. (1986). *Rumpelstiltskin*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.