

Literature Circles: Effective Practices That Promote Participation



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Abstract

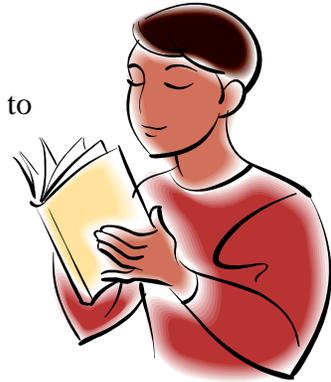
The purpose of this action research project was to use literature circles to engage sixth grade students when reading novels and responding to literature. Literature circles were used to give the students more responsibility when reading novels. I used observation, a personal research diary, student surveys, self and group evaluations, focus groups, whole-class discussions, student response journals, and student role sheets to monitor progress. I found that the students became active and responsible participants in literature circles across the two phases of the project.

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Introduction

I looked out into the classroom as one sixth grader began to read. I expected to see all of the students quietly listening and following along in their novels. Instead, I saw the other eight students in the class drawing, reading ahead, or simply day-dreaming. This became very frustrating because my students were not listening to the reading unless it was their turn to read.



I teach in a very small private K-8 school in the suburbs. I am the only English teacher for the middle school, and my classes range from nine to 15 students. Despite the small class size, all of my 6th graders were not participating in discussions. I asked valuable questions, and the students who were listening were able to answer them. After keeping track of student responses, I came to the realization that only two out of nine were consistently participating. These two loved to hear themselves talk. They would get upset if they had raised their hand and I called on another student instead.

I knew that I wanted my students to be engaged and active, yet I kept coming to the same conclusions: I was choosing the reading, I was finding the vocabulary words, I was coming up with discussion questions, and I was choosing the extension activities. I knew something was missing in my literature lessons, and I couldn't figure out what. One of my colleagues from the elementary school recommended trying literature circles. She had not tried them herself but thought they might be valuable in my classroom. She also anticipated that my experience with literature circles would be valuable to the other reading teachers in my school.

Literature Review

Collaborative Learning Groups

As I began to research what might benefit my class of nine 6th grade students, I continuously read that it is important for students to be given the opportunity to work in small collaborative learning groups. According to Stahl (1994), collaborative learning has the following essential elements: a clear set of instructional objectives, heterogeneous groups, equal opportunity for success, positive interdependence, face-to-face interaction, positive social interaction, individual accountability, and post-group reflection or debriefing. I believed that this type of group interaction was vital to my students' growth as learners. "Cooperation is one of the most important human activities" (Slavin, 1987, p.7). Collaborative learning prepares learners for the type of team work and critical interchange vital to being effective participants in their communities and workplaces as they leave school (Ngeow, 1998). Group work is a perfect way to give students both the structure and the freedom needed to dive into literature and experience it in a new way (Day, 2003). Harvey Daniels (2001) defines collaborative learning as "true inquiry in small group higher-order, student-centered, open-ended activities" (p.35). I knew that my students should have the opportunity to explore literature, to test their creativity through activities and projects and, as a result, to take ownership of their reading.

Literature Circles

I began by looking for a way to implement collaborative learning using literature in my sixth grade

classroom. As I searched, I continued to read more and more about literature circles.

I believed that literature circles could work in my class.

Daniels states that “literature circles display the characteristic features of true collaboration: student-initiated [sic], inquiry, choice, self-direction, mutual interdependence, face to face interaction, and self- and group assessment” (p.35).

Research shows that “not only have literature circles increased reading comprehension skills, but this activity also has encouraged students to become active listeners and risk takers while increasing their communication skills, and developing more of their thinking abilities” (Brown, 2002, p.3). “Cooperative discussion of reading passages increases retention of reading content, and cooperative discussion improves problem-solving behavior” (Slavin, 1987, p. 9). Literature circles were the best way to increase understanding while also allowing my students to work together and be creative.

Phase One

Phase One began in October and ended at the beginning of December. I began by dividing my class into groups of three, assigning each group to one of the three novels I had chosen. I wanted to keep some control over decisions being made because the process of literature circles was new to my students and to me. As I had not used literature circles in my classroom before I was very fearful and unsure of the process. The students were in groups based on their reading ability. They read the novels aloud in their groups.

Each student was given a job. The jobs included: Discussion Director, Literary Luminary, and Vocabulary Enricher. The roles were rotated each week. The Discussion Director was given sentence starters for discussion questions at varying levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy and then led discussion. The job of the Literary Luminary was to pick an important or meaningful passage from the text; they would then read aloud a passage and

explain why it was chosen. The Vocabulary Enricher found four words from the reading that were new to them. They then copied down the sentence in which they found the words, created their personal definitions, located the correct definitions from the dictionary, and selected two synonyms for each.

Students would read in their groups one day and then meet for discussion the next. Bevevino and Snodgrass (2000) recommend that the facilitator take anecdotal notes to keep track of students' participation. I would spend the entire 30 minutes with the designated group and leave it only if another group had a question or problem they could not resolve on their own. After each discussion, one student from each of the three groups would let me know how the discussion was going, and if everyone was completing their work on time. Students put their job worksheets in a group folder after each discussion. I graded their work at the end of each week.

I decided to require that the Literary Luminary tally each student's rate of participation. I thought this would be a great way to figure out how well the students were participating. Instead, I had students arguing over whether or not their comment or question was marked down. Students would generally make a tally mark for anything the other students said, even if it had nothing to do with the discussion.

The culminating experience for Phase One was a group project. Two groups re-wrote their favorite scene from their book

into play form and presented it to the class. The third group created 3-D characters from the book. They used their characters to play out a scene from the book. These projects



3-D Character created by one of my students

allowed for creativity and expression, and showed that students had really gotten "into" the reading.

Phase Two



During this first phase of literature circles my students were beginning to formulate valuable discussion questions, help each other understand the novel, and take responsibility for their individual jobs. They connected with the novels as they began talking and sharing about how the novels compared to their own lives. While I saw elements of success, I also noticed areas that needed improvement.

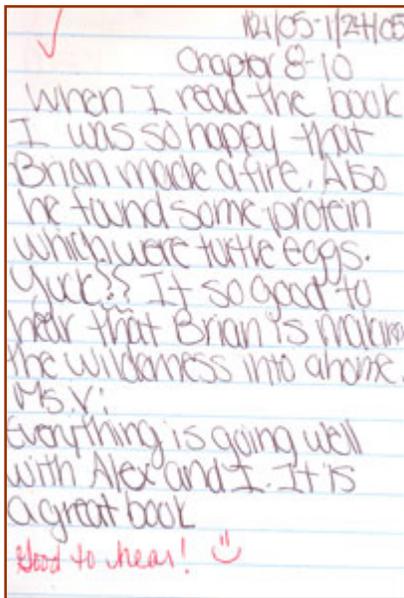
Phase Two began in January and ended in February. There were three specific things I wanted to improve on during our second phase of literature circles: grouping, observation, and feedback. First, I was unhappy with the way I had divided the students into groups. I thought my students would work better with students who were at their reading level. However, the best readers seemed to argue and disagree more than the other groups did. Next, I wanted to increase the amount of time spent observing each group. During the first phase I could not adequately assess student participation and the students serving as checkers was not an accurate assessment. I wanted to spend time with each group daily. Lastly, I wanted to improve the efficiency of our literature circle routine. I needed to know everyone's questions and comments concerning the reading and discussion.

During Phase Two the entire class read *Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen. I randomly assigned students to groups, hoping that this would mix ability levels. I realized that for sixth grade students independent reading would be more appropriate than oral reading. I

also revised my observation schedule so that I was observing each group daily. I spent approximately five minutes with each group. This gave me first-hand data on the progress that was being made.

Student roles during literature circles were also modified. I replaced the Literary Luminary role with the role of Artist. They were in charge of drawing four pictures of scenes from the story in sequential order and describing each scene in one or two sentences. This role was more at their level than the Literary Luminary job had been.

I continued using focus groups because I felt that they gave me great insight into my students' thoughts and concerns. However, I needed to know what my students were



thinking about their reading as well as how well their group was working. I gave each student a small spiral notebook. In their notebook they could write words they didn't understand, questions they had for me or their group members, and how the story made them feel. The journals allowed me to communicate back and forth with each individual student. I collected journals twice a week. This way I could keep track of individual progress and group progress.

The culminating activity for Phase Two was a writing assignment based on the novel. Students could either re-write the ending as if the main character had not been rescued or write a sequel to the story in which the character returns to the wilderness after many years. After going through the writing process we held a "Survival Party." Students signed up to bring "gross" food like gummy insects and ants on a log, and created a faux

campfire. During our “Survival Party” the students sat around the campfire and read their stories aloud to one another “with feeling.” Parents were impressed with how the students wrote and related to the novel.

Data Collection

I used a personal research diary to keep track of how things were progressing during each phase of literature circles. I collected student feedback by using initial and post surveys. During each phase the students completed evaluations, role sheets and participated in focus groups. During the second phase students also used response journals to write about their reading. Below are excerpts from my own research diary, student surveys and focus group discussions.

My Research Diary Entries

<u>Phase One</u>	<u>Phase Two</u>
<i>Some students seem to be spacing out during discussions while others love to hear themselves talk.</i> September 2004	<i>Literature circles seem to run much more smoothly with the new role, Artist. The students are not only being creative, but also using sequence.</i> January 2005
<i>I want to make novels more exciting in my class by getting the students involved in their reading. I am going to try using literature circles in my classroom. One of my co-workers has recommended using them, but has not tried them herself.</i> October 2004	<i>Allowing the students to read independently has been much more effective. They are also using their reading journals to write down unfamiliar words and questions about the reading.</i> January 2005
<i>Some students have voiced concerns about the Literary Luminary role. I will be looking for a role to replace this one for the next phase of literature circles and a better way to observe participation.</i> November 2004	<i>Spending five minutes with each group during discussion has allowed me to see any cooperation problems that might be occurring. I have also been able to keep better track of who is on task.</i> February 2005
<i>Everyone did an excellent job of presenting their projects. They were excited to share with the other groups what they had read.</i>	<i>The students were so excited about re-writing the end of the story! They decided that they MUST share them with each</i>

<i>This was also a good way for the students to hear about the other books.</i> December 2004	<i>other! We have decided to have a Survival Party to culminate our experience. We will definitely use literature circles again.</i> February 2005
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Student Data

Pre-Survey	Phase One Focus Group	Phase Two Focus Group	Post-Survey
5 Students choose to read independently	<i>Everyone is working well together, but some people aren't completing their homework.</i> SZ, October	<i>Our group has made our own rules to follow and that works really well. We always start our discussion by talking about our journal entry and that helps our discussion flow.</i> AT, January	7 Students choose to read independently
6 Students choose to participate in class discussions	<i>Some of the role sheets, like Literary Luminary, are taking too long to complete and are hard to understand. Maybe we should come up with a new role.</i> SC, November	<i>Everyone is trying to participate and if someone has a question we all take out our books and try to help them find the answer.</i> AR, February	7 Students choose to participate in class discussions
1 Student looks up unfamiliar words when reading	<i>I like to read ahead, but I can't do that with my group. Some people take a lot longer to read than I do. I would rather read by myself and then discuss it with my group.</i> NS, December	<i>I liked the fact that we could work together and the Survival Party. That was fun!</i> <i>I learned how to really understand the book.</i> AR, February	3 Students look up unfamiliar words when reading

Student feedback showed me that the changes I had made during Phase Two were beneficial. They allowed literature circles to flow better because there was more organization. Students were also receptive to the fact that they were able to give me feedback and that I was paying attention to it. I was able to meet my students' needs by simply asking them how things were going. The number of students that read

independently, participated in discussions, and looked up unfamiliar words increased by the end of the project.

Reflections

What I Learned

As I reflect on my experiences with literature circles I feel a sense of excitement about what comes next. My class and I made strides from Phase One to



Phase Two. They were able to learn very important skills that they could use. They learned that it is okay to find new words and define them. Students were able to formulate meaningful questions. Most importantly, they learned how to collaborate with each other in a way that was positive and meaningful. I saw students ask each other questions without any teacher prompting.

Overall, I learned that organization is the key to success. If the teacher has organized roles, schedules, and feedback systems everything will run smoothly. Daniels (2001) emphasizes that literature circle schedules must be regular, frequent, and predictable. I will definitely keep journaling, focus groups, culminating group projects, random grouping, and observing each group at least five minutes during each discussion. These techniques allowed me to know how each group progressed, but also gave the students the freedom to be creative and the flexibility to be responsive to one another.

In the future I will use more explicit instruction so that students can use reference tools, look for literacy devices, and apply vocabulary learning strategies in more efficient ways. I will also give the students more choice in selecting the novels they read.

What My Students Learned

Most of my students love literature circles. They now realize that it is important to analyze the text and to reflect on what they read. Each student feels confident in sharing ideas as well as questions. In October during a whole class 30 minute discussion, six students participated an average of seven times. In February all nine students participated an average of four times during my five minute observations. While it is encouraging to see so much involvement, it was even more exciting to hear students say, “ This is a fun way to read a book.”

Today, as I look out into the sixth grade classroom, the atmosphere has changed. When I ask for a volunteer reader or discussant, every hand goes up. My students are visibly confident in their reading and discussion skills. The same two students still love to hear themselves talk, but now the rest of the class is just as eager to contribute.

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