

**Monday, 1 April 2007**

**Do we actually have to sit in a circle?**  
**A brief reflective essay concerning  
the use and effectiveness of  
Literature Circles in the classroom**

An ancient Chinese proverb that is commonly attributed to Confucius states that

“teachers open the door, but you enter by yourself” (Moncur, 2007). While formal education has obviously changed greatly over the last 2500 years, this quote applies to students now more than it ever has! In many classrooms across the United States, a teacher stands at the front of the classroom and acts as *the* driving force of discussion. While teachers are typically considered the experts in their subjects and therefore have much to offer their students, few activities encourage active critical thinking like student-led discussions. Within literature and reading classes, this type of engagement is surprisingly easy to implement through use of literature circles.

Literature circles are called many different things such as book clubs, literature groups, and small-group literature discussions, but all refer to the same activity: several students reading the same book and coming together to discuss their ideas with one another. Fountas & Pinnell prefer the term “book clubs” because it connotes the students having “a good time together talking about a book” (2006, p. 280). Choosing that particular connotation really says something about the atmosphere surrounding literature circles—it should be enjoyable, relaxed, and safe in order to encourage open discussion amongst the students.

There are several key components of book clubs that make them validated and truly effective classroom practices. Firstly, the main idea is “that greater insight” comes from “several people shar[ing] their thinking” (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006, p. 280). Instead of simply having one's own ideas about a book, each student will be subjected to several other interpretations and opinions. Secondly, because of those new and potentially differing perspectives, students will begin to appreciate other viewpoints which will reduce egocentrism. Thirdly, unlike many other school topics like algebraic polynomials and historical dates, book clubs don't have empirically “right answers” (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006, p. 280). That lack of empiricism might seem academically unnerving at first glance, but further investigation reveals a truly important underlying premise of literature circles: opinion

validation. Students may not have to have a 'correct answer,' but they should offer to the group examples from the text that support their opinions, viewpoints, and ideas (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006).

There are many validated practices in education, so you may be asking yourself “why should I use *this* one for teaching literature?” Using any one method of instruction rapidly becomes mundane to both teachers and students, but literature circles should definitely be incorporated into the teachers instructional repertoire because of their vast multidisciplinary benefits for students. First, students will not only be exposed to new perspectives, but they will also have the chance to ask one another for help or clarification on a challenging text. In this way, the students have the chance to peer-teach, which is also a validated learning and memory strategy (Sternberg & Williams, 2004). Second, students will have to talk with one another and will therefore develop interpersonal skills and some of the hidden social rules of group communication. They will learn, for example, not to interrupt one another but rather to let everyone have their turn to talk. Third, the children will tend to study a text more deeply “if they know a discussion is coming” (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006, p. 281).

With the students doing all this work, it may seem like you (as the teacher) don't have a whole lot of involvement. While you may not be active during the discussions, you are responsible for preemptively teaching the skills that students can and should take into their book clubs. You will have to teach the students about several literary themes—like characters, style, language, tone, mood, point of view, chronology, and foreshadowing, for example—so that students will have a whole arsenal of aspects to consider within their groups (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006, pp. 289-292). With so many components of literature on which to focus, chances are slim that any two students will focus on the same topic, let alone have the exact same outlook regarding that respective topic. You are also responsible for choosing the books or families of books that the students will use during their discussions.

It's important to not only choose books that are at the students' independent reading levels, but also ones that will spark good and diverse conversations (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006, p. 294). Lastly, students need to be directly taught the general rules of talking to one another about books. It's imperative that they understand how to build upon "one another's ideas," and consequently lead the discussion in an appropriate direction (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006, p. 281).

Though it may seem like a huge amount of preemptive teaching goes into literature circles, the benefits to students far outweigh this large introductory preparation. Students are much more likely to remember books that they have read if they have to discuss them with their peers. Call them literature circles; call them book clubs; call them whatever you want, but just make sure that the activity is put to good use throughout the school year within your own classrooms.

## REFERENCES:

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