

Information Circles: Teaching Students to Read and Respond to Informational Texts

by

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### **Abstract**

This project focuses on best practices for incorporating informational text comprehension instruction with middle years' content area instruction. The project provides teachers with a classroom resource that can be used with text collections centered on a theme that corresponds with content area learning outcomes. The *Information Circles* resource addresses both language arts and content area learning outcomes and is designed with generalist teachers in mind. The review of the literature indicated that informational texts can motivate middle years' students and that best practices for adolescent literacy instruction include extended time for literacy, explicit comprehension strategy instruction, diverse, accessible, multi-modal texts, student choice and student talk centered on texts. The resource includes a unit outline, suggestions for text selection, sample lessons, informational text comprehension strategies and assessment considerations. Finally, the reflection discusses the classroom experiences and academic readings that inspired me to create a resource that integrates subject area learning and reading comprehension instruction.

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### **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this project to my kids: those that are mine for a brief year of their school life, and the one that is mine by birth. May I be an example of life-long learning for all of you.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

One of my biggest struggles as a teacher of middle years' students has always been finding engaging ways to teach the science and social studies curricula. I believe that I have done a good job of cultivating a love of reading and literature, and I have found it easy to integrate a hands-on constructivist approach to teaching mathematics, but I continue to be at a loss for how to make the science and social studies content engaging and relevant. I admit that on numerous occasions I have defaulted back to whole class reading of textbook sections, with whole class discussions and short assignments that summarize the information. I will be the first to acknowledge that these activities are not the most motivating for student learning. However, my past attempts to increase student interest and engagement have not increased student learning. I have tried to integrate social studies learning with research and poster presentations, but found that my students spent more time on the artwork than on learning the social studies content. Further, they often struggled with the research component itself, and struggled to read both print and online information on their topic. In science, I tried engaging students with raising salmonids from eggs to fry and then releasing them into the Nechako River, but despite the excitement of the hands-on activities, I have experienced difficulties to connect the learning with the science content. Finally, I have struggled in both subject areas due to the complete lack of background knowledge and numerous misconceptions of my students in respect to current events, world issues, history, science and technology. I continue to be overwhelmed with the amount of science and social studies content, and the actual classroom time I have to address this content.

My failed attempts at invigorating my science and social studies curriculum have all centered on the integration of the language arts curriculum with the science or social studies learning outcomes. I still think this integration is important. I would like to be able to teach my students to be able to read and understand informational texts so that they can deepen their understanding of the science and

social studies content. In essence, I want my students to be able to learn to read and read to learn concurrently. This desire was my motivation for this project. I have created a resource called *Information Circles*, which combines informational reading, comprehension strategy instruction and peer-based discussion with content area texts in order to facilitate student competence with a variety of informational texts.

### **Informational Text Definition**

Informational texts have the following characteristics: a) an intention to convey information about the natural/social world, b) factual and durable content, c) timeless verb constructions – plants *need* water to grow, d) generic noun constructions – *people* travel on airplanes, e) technical vocabulary – *chlorophyll* is the pigment found in plant leaves, f) classifications and definitions – mammals are warm-blooded animals that have hair, breathe air, birth live young and feed milk to babies, g) internal text structures – compare/contrast, cause/effect problem/solution, description, sequence, and so on, h) external text structures – diagrams, graphs, maps, charts, and so on (Duke, 2000; Fang, 2006; Hall-Kenyon & Black, 2010; Moss, 2004; Ness, 2011; Purcell-Gates, Duke, & Martineau, 2007). While every one of these features may not be present in every informational text, this group of features does distinguish informational text from other text genres. For example, a newspaper article conveys information about the world, provides factual content, describes people and events, but may or may not include classifications, definitions, or use timeless verbs and generic nouns, but is still considered an informational text. Informational texts are complex and occur in a wide range of forms; however, if a text contains a significant number of the features described above, it can be fairly accurately described as an informational text. This project focused on informational texts that adhere to the above definition so that students can clearly identify them as informational. These texts can be print, (articles, textbooks, trade books), visual (images, movies), or multimedia (Internet pages) in nature. The British Columbia English Language Arts K-7 IRP (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2006a) provides a

specific list of the types of informational texts appropriate in middle years' classrooms. These include nonfiction books, textbooks and other instructional materials, visual or graphic materials, reports and articles from magazines and journals, reference materials, websites, instructions and procedures and advertising and promotional materials, all of which fall under the definition of informational texts described above.

### **Importance of Informational Reading**

Reading and writing informational texts is a valuable form of semiotic capital in our society (Duke, 2000; New London Group, 1996); that is, those individuals who are competent users of informational texts will experience more success in their working, private and civic lives. We live in a world where it is necessary to be able to quickly procure information, comprehend it and finally, assess it critically to determine if it is of any value or not. One must be able to read and write both print and visual informational texts, yet the research shows that this instruction is lacking in most elementary and middle grade level classrooms (Duke, 2000; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Ness, 2011; Pitcher, Martinez, Dicembre, Fewster, & McCormick, 2010). Recent advances in technology and the explosion of information on the Internet, which are informational in nature (Moss, 2004; Schmar-Dobler, 2003), only provide further support for teachers to focus on informational texts at all grade levels. When we look at the literacy tasks that our students will be required to engage in when they enter the adult world, it is clear that they need to become confident users and producers of informational texts.

The importance of being able to comprehend and evaluate informational texts is difficult to deny, yet its instruction continues to be scarce across all grade levels. Many students are failing to adequately develop these crucial skills (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Guthrie & Davis, 2003; Lee & Sprately, 2010; Ness, 2011; Pitcher et al., 2010; Tovani, 2004). It appears that informational text instruction activities vary greatly in middle years' classrooms despite students' expressed interest in informational materials (Cameron, 2010; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Pitcher, Albright, DeLaney, Walker, Seunariningsingh,

Mogge, Headley, Ridgeway, Peck, Hunt & Dunston, 2007; Worthy, 2002; Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999) and its inclusion in curriculum and standards documents. The British Columbia English Language Arts K-7 (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2006a) curriculum states that students in Grade 6 should be able to “read fluently and demonstrate comprehension of grade appropriate information texts, with some specialized language” (p.57) and has a similar learning outcome at every grade level. Furthermore, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) identifies obtaining and communicating information as one of the key purposes of the language arts curriculum and recognizes that this learning must occur across a broad range of print and non-print based media forms (NCTE, 1996). Clearly, teachers are in need of support, resources and creative ways to teach informational reading skills in order to benefit their students and meet curricular demands.

While the amount of instructional time focused on, and classroom and library access to informational texts is slowly improving (Cameron, 2010; Dreher, 2003; Larkin-Lieffers, 2007; Ness, 2011), most students continue to struggle with reading comprehension in their high school content area classes (Allington, 2002; Lee & Spratley, 2010; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008; Tovani, 2004). Duke (2000) has written extensively on this topic and argues “we must assume that in order to become strong readers and writers of informational texts, a learner would need substantial experience comprehending and producing such texts” (p. 207) and the fact that students struggle with the reading demands of high school tells us we may not be doing enough in the early and middle grades. Students must be provided with adequate informational text experiences when 75% of the texts used in school beyond the sixth grade are informational in nature (Moss, 2004). On the whole, informational texts have proven to be more difficult reading material for students than narrative texts (Langer, 1985) partly because of student inexperience with the text type, and partly because students are unfamiliar with the complex organization and structure of informational texts (Hall-Kenyon & Black, 2008; Moss, 2004). Further, middle and high school content area textbooks are often written at instructional levels beyond the level

of the students who are using them (Allington, 2002; Tovani, 2004) making the need for students to possess informational literacy skills in order to raise their reading levels more compelling. Teachers must begin to address the complex structures, vocabulary and content demands of informational texts well before students reach middle and high school when the demands of these texts overwhelm their abilities.

### **What Good Readers of Informational Texts Do**

If we acknowledge that informational literacy skills are crucial for later success not only in school but also in a student's future community and work lives, we must determine what a proficient reader (or viewer) of informational texts does in order to identify the skills we need to teach to our students. Proficient readers of any text are purposeful, engaged and strategic; they know why they are reading, they are focused on the task, and they use strategies to help them make sense of the text at hand (Brown, 2002; Duke & Pearson, 2002; Ogle & Blachowicz, 2002; Wharton-McDonald & Swiger, 2009). Readers of informational texts must deal with the organization and structure of informational texts and they must navigate internal and external text features, which can be troublesome for many developing readers (Duke & Pearson, 2002; Fang, 2008; Moss, 2004; Ogle & Blachowicz, 2002; Tovani, 2004). Informational texts often use several structures within a single text, making the text more difficult (Daniels, 2002; Hall-Kenyon & Black, 2010). Proficient readers of informational texts can recognize and interpret these text features, which can deepen their understanding of the text. Readers who struggle with comprehension are often frustrated or distracted by these text features. Readers of informational texts must also be proficient at merging their background knowledge of not only the topic at hand, but also word meaning, syntax, and genre with strategies to help their comprehension (questioning, predicting, summarizing and monitoring meaning) (Lee & Spratley, 2010.) Finally, proficient readers of visual informational texts must apply the same comprehension strategies (questioning, predicting, summarizing, and so on) while addressing elements of design, form, organization and voice. It is

important to recognize and learn from the skills that proficient readers of informational texts use so that we can help our struggling readers acquire these essential skills that will help them to be successful in our modern world.

The instructional resource that I created for this project, *Information Circles* (see Chapter 3), provides teachers with a tool they can use in their classroom to provide students with experiences with a variety of print, visual and multimedia informational texts while developing reading comprehension skills that will help all students become more proficient readers of informational texts.

### **Information Circles**

*Information Circles* is an instructional resource that I designed to help upper intermediate and middle years teachers improve the reading comprehension skills of their students. I derived *Information Circles* from Literature Circles, a popular instructional technique already used in many intermediate and middle years classrooms. Literature circles are popular because they “model democratic ideals, are student centered, and can be empowering to the participants” (Alger, 2007, p. 622) involved in them. The term literature circles is itself very broad and describes a continuum of practices from role-based discussions (Daniels, 2002) to more free-flowing authentic book club discussions of literature (Brownlie, 2005). My instructional resource, *Information Circles*, builds on the literature circle ideas of Daniels (2002) and Brownlie (2005), but extends them to informational texts. In essence, students participating in *Information Circles* are expected to choose an appropriate article (or other informational text, often with both print and visual content) from a teacher-arranged set, read (or view) the text, complete independent response and comprehension activities, and participate in meaningful peer-based conversations about the texts they have read. Independent response and comprehension strategy activities will vary depending on the text but they provide students with practice responding to informational texts and applying comprehension strategies such as accessing background knowledge, making connections, questioning, inferring, identifying main idea and details, summarizing, synthesizing

and, recognizing and using text features (Brown, 2002; Duke & Pearson, 2002; Gear, 2008; Harvey & Goudvis, 2007; Keene & Zimmerman, 2007; Ogle & Blachowicz, 2002; Wharton-McDonald & Swiger, 2009). Peer-based discussion groups will include discussion of main ideas, interesting facts, vocabulary/technical terms and any issues that arise from the text. While the idea of information circles is not new, and there is discussion of the application of literature circles to nonfiction texts (Daniels, 2002b; Daniels, 2006; Stien & Beed, 2004), there is little research or curriculum development providing details of and supporting their specific use, especially for middle years students. However, as discussed in Chapter 2, there is ample research that supports the use of authentic engaging texts, strategy based comprehension instruction, and peer-based discussion. There are also numerous professional resources for teachers that describe research based strategies for teaching students how to read informational texts. Within this project I review the support for the use of *Information Circles* in middle years classrooms, describe their function and format in full, and provide sample unit and lessons plans to make the classroom implementation of *Information Circles* a possibility for other teachers who are interested in this area of literacy development. *Information Circles* can be an exciting way for students to increase their exposure to and practice with informational texts.

The design of the *Information Circles* resource affords teachers with the ability to integrate reading instruction with content area instruction, particularly in classrooms where one teacher teaches all or most of the core subjects, allowing the integration of for example language arts with social studies. Teachers are in complete control of selecting relevant, accessible and interesting texts for their students which allows them to choose texts that match curriculum in the content areas if they so desire. For example, if a Grade 6 teacher wants to use *Information Circles* with a social studies unit, appropriate texts could include articles on Canadian identity and heritage, photos of important Canadian symbols and icons, and a textbook chapter on the Canadian justice system. Subject integration frees up time for teachers to teach more learning outcomes, demonstrates to students that subject areas are connected

and the integration of “reading and content instruction throughout the elementary grades can help children learn to read at the same time they read to learn” (Moss, 2005, p. 50). This approach makes *Information Circles* a particularly valuable resource as it can be used not only in English language arts classes, but in any subject area class where a teacher wants students to read and discuss a variety of informational texts. *Information Circles* has great potential to be a resource for integrating literacy instruction with content area instruction. The overall goal of *Information Circles* is to help all students become more purposeful, more engaged and more strategic readers. These goals are accomplished through the inclusion of a variety of accessible texts, authentic purposes for reading, explicit strategy instruction, managed choice, and ample discussion of texts with teachers and peers. As discussed in Chapter 2, abundant research supports each of these features as key components of effective reading programs. *Information Circles* provides a framework for teaching informational text comprehension in middle grade classrooms, whether the texts are content area textbooks, websites, posters, photographs, informational trade books, encyclopedias, manuals, recipes, or scientific articles. In short, *Information Circles* is an integrated approach to reading instruction that merges effective informational reading practices with engaging content.

### ***Why Information Circles?***

I have been teaching Grade 6/7 for several years, and year after year I have watched my students struggle while working with informational texts. I teach Grade 6/7 in a semi-rural K-7 school in Prince George, British Columbia. My students predominantly come from working class families with little post-secondary school experience. Many families work in agriculture or local industrial businesses and have chosen to live on larger properties a short distance from town. My students often know about aspects of country life I have little experience with such as raising horses, breeding animals, building snowmobiles, and driving tractor-trailers, but they lack knowledge about global issues. Many of their

opinions and ideas about the world are full of misconceptions and prejudices. I teach wonderful, kind students who struggle with the many demands of informational texts.

My students often have difficulty identifying main ideas – when highlighting key points in a current events article I usually see more highlighting than I see white paper. They think all the ideas are important. My students struggle with reading content area textbooks as the pages make use of complex text features and include difficult vocabulary while discussing unfamiliar content. These students do not find the textbooks engaging or easy to read. My students do not know how to find information on a webpage. If the information they require is not immediately apparent, they simply announce that they cannot find it. Most of all, my students have a distinct lack of background knowledge about the world - they struggle to understand key issues in texts without a significant amount of discussion before, during or after. This lack of background knowledge is one of the reasons I decided to design my instructional resource. I wanted to find a way that I could teach my students to read informational texts while providing them with interesting and engaging texts that teach them something about the natural and social worlds which surround them.

I decided on *Information Circles* for several reasons. First of all, I have seen very positive reactions from my students to the literature circle strategy. My students enjoy having a chance to read a variety of fiction texts and are excited to meet with their peers to discuss their selections in small groups. I have noticed much more honesty and focus in these small group discussions than all of my students are comfortable and capable of expressing in the whole-class setting. My students are generally excited about reading fiction in my classroom, in part because I have been very purposeful in my selection and discussion of literature in my classroom. I want see my students respond similarly to informational texts, which is one of the reasons I selected this topic. I have tried several approaches to teaching informational text that were quite flat and lifeless, and this project constituted an attempt to make informational text instruction engaging for my students. I chose this format because I want an

integrated approach as I see so much potential for teaching reading simultaneously with either social studies or science, and as mentioned above, I have struggled with making the social studies and science content engaging and relevant. Creating this resource provided me with the opportunity to consolidate the vision I had of an approach to teaching that integrated quality reading instruction with the content area subjects I have to teach.

Another reason I chose to focus on informational text comprehension for this project was because my school has been very focused on teaching reading comprehension strategies for the last several years. However, these strategies have been almost exclusively focused on narrative texts. While this instruction has greatly improved the metacognition and comprehension skills of our students, informational reading has not been a central focus while teachers learned how to teach these comprehension strategies through use Gear's (2006, 2008) Reading Powers which originally focused on narrative texts. Now that teachers are comfortable teaching these strategies, and our students are competent using them, we need to shift our focus to strategies specific to informational texts. I designed this resource to be used not only in my classroom, but also in other classrooms in my school as teachers have expressed a need and desire for more professional development in this area. Our desire to focus on informational texts coincides with a general trend of increased student exposure to informational texts across all the elementary and middle grades. *Information Circles* responds to the needs of my students, and responds to the call of educational scholars for a greater focus on informational texts.

### **Overview of Project**

This project includes four chapters. The first chapter has provided the reader with a general outline of the project and relevant background information on the importance of teaching students to be competent readers (and viewers) of informational texts as well as some important definitions. The second chapter is the literature review, which outlines the theoretical framework for this project, some

best practices for adolescent literacy, and provides information and research in the areas of content area literacy and literature circles. The third chapter is the resource, called *Information Circles*, which I created for teachers to use in their classrooms to improve student reading comprehension of informational text. This resource can be used across many subject areas and is easily integrated into content area classrooms. The fourth chapter is my personal reflection on the process of completing this project. It details the process I went through in order to research and write this project and discusses what might be next for my professional development.

## Chapter 2

### A Review of the Literature

There is ample evidence that suggests the integration of *Information Circles* in middle years classrooms could address many of the difficulties experienced by students when reading informational texts. First of all, numerous studies support the inclusion of informational texts in all classrooms for the purpose of instructing middle years' students about the form and function of informational texts. Secondly, many reports, studies and documents discuss best practices for adolescent literacy and identify what must happen in middle years' classrooms in order for our students to graduate with the necessary literacy skills to be active, productive, and successful citizens. This literature clearly identifies reading comprehension instruction through the explicit teaching of cognitive strategies as a best practice in adolescent literacy instruction. Some of these strategies are more applicable to informational texts than others (e.g., identifying main idea/details), and it is these strategies that students participating in *Information Circles* will use and practice while reading and responding to Informational texts. Further, research in strategy instruction identifies instruction in recognizing and using the internal and external features of informational texts as a means for increased comprehension. Next, research has examined the role of content area literacy skills on student success in school – students need to know how to read to learn, and it is important for teachers to adopt best practices for reading instruction in specific content areas. Finally, it is important to look at the research that identifies literature circles as an instructional technique worthy of use in our classrooms specifically to teach the reading of information texts. The research on Literature circles suggests that this structure is motivating for students and provides students with opportunities to further develop their understanding of a variety of texts through peer-based discussions. This chapter reviews briefly each of these bodies of literature.

## Theoretical Framework

In order to understand how students come to develop an understanding of the informational texts they read, we must examine the process by which theorists believe reading occurs and how students develop comprehension skills. We must also acknowledge theories that recognize a definition of text beyond traditional notions of print-based texts. First of all, Rosenblatt's (1994) transactional theory of reading and Pearson and Gallagher's (1983) model of explicit comprehension instruction both rely on schema theory to explain the process of reading comprehension. These constructivist theories of learning describe the learner as "the builder" (Pearson, 2009) who builds or constructs their own understanding based on their previous knowledge, experience with the text and their interaction with others. Secondly, we must address the discussion component of *Information Circles* in light of sociocultural theory. Finally, we need to address this work within a multiliteracies perspective as our students must be able to work with a variety of text types (visual, auditory, multimedia and so on) in order to be successful citizens in modern society (New London Group, 1996). These theoretical frameworks provide the foundation for the *Information Circles* resource described in Chapter 3.

Reading comprehension is a complex process that occurs when readers attempt to make sense of a text they encounter and there are several theories describing how this process occurs. Comprehension, as we understand it today, is a constructive process defined as "the listener or reader's [or viewer's] understanding of the message expressed by the speaker or writer [or creator]" (Duke & Carlisle, 2010, p. 200). This meaning is constructed by the reader, based on an interaction between the reader's knowledge and experience, the text and the context of the reading event (Duke & Carlisle, 2010; Pearson, 2009). Different readers may construct different meanings from text as every reader brings a unique set of knowledge and experience to each text they read (Rosenblatt, 1994). Constructivist views of reading were greatly influenced by the emergence of schema theory in the late 1970's/early 1980's (Pearson, 2009), which positioned the reader as central to meaning making, and

“introduced ambiguity about the question of where meaning resides” (Pearson, 2009, p. 14). Pearson and Spiro (1982) describe a schema as “the little pictures or associations you conjure up in your head when you read a word or sentence” (p. 46), and it is these associations that readers use to build meaning as they read. Rosenblatt’s (1994) transactional theory of reading also identifies readers and their “linguistic-experiential reservoir” (p. 1061) as important in the meaning making process.

Rosenblatt describes reading as a “transaction involving a particular reader and a particular pattern of signs, a text and occurring at a particular time in a particular context” (p. 1063), and that meaning “comes into being during the transaction between reader and text (p. 1063). These theories all suggest “that comprehension occurs at the intersection of reader, text and context” (Pearson, 2009, p. 14).

While the process of how a reader makes meaning from a text is a “complex, nonlinear, recursive, self-correcting transaction” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 1064), there appears to be agreement in the literature on how to approach the teaching of comprehension: through the explicit teaching of strategies.

Pearson and Gallagher (1983) first described the model of explicit instruction used to teach comprehension strategies dubbed the gradual release of responsibility. This model is frequently cited in strategy instruction research and reviews (Duke & Pearson, 2002; Keene & Zimmerman, 2007; Pearson, 2009; Pearson & Fielding, 1991) and is described by both reading curriculum and teaching resource books and documents (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2006a; Fisher & Frey, 2008; Gear, 2006, 2008; Harvey & Goudvis, 2007). Instruction based on this model begins with teacher-led lessons that provide direct instruction of the task to be completed by the students. Teachers explain, describe and model the task in action during this first stage and assume full responsibility for task completion. Fisher and Frey (2008) argue that teacher modeling of their own thinking about texts is essential as it provides students with examples of strategies in action before they attempt to incorporate them independently. As students start to understand the task, teachers facilitate students in guided practice, whereby students and teachers work collaboratively to complete the task. As students gain competence and

confidence with the task, they move to the independent practice stage, where they assume full responsibility for task completion. Teachers must be careful when they move on to this final stage, as “unfortunately, too many middle school students are assigned independent learning tasks for which they have not yet received adequate instruction to be successful” (Fisher & Frey, 2008, p. 19). This model of instruction is applicable for skills across the entire curriculum, but with respect to reading comprehension instruction, it is often used to teach readers to use strategies before, during and after reading to become adaptable and flexible (Pearson, 2009) strategic readers (Duke & Pearson, 2002; Keene & Zimmerman, 2007; Paris, Lipson & Wixson, 1983 ).

Rosenblatt (1994) describes a reader’s purpose while reading as being on a continuum between two opposing stances: an efferent stance or an aesthetic stance. An efferent stance “designates the kind of reading in which attention is centered predominantly on what is to be extracted and retained after the reading event” (p. 1066), while a primarily aesthetic stance refers to “an attitude of readiness to focus attention on what is being lived through during a reading event” (p. 1067). In essence, efferent reading is all about gaining information, while aesthetic reading is all about experiencing the text. However, it is important to note that one’s stance can fluctuate during the reading event and that the efferent end of the continuum does not apply solely to informational texts nor does the aesthetic stance apply solely to narrative or poetic texts. We must teach students to read both narrative and informational texts from either stance, as “this stresses the importance of using quality examples of fiction and informational books to ensure a balance of opportunities for students to experience texts that can be read efferently and/or aesthetically” (Doiron, 2003, p.41). Students must have experience reading informational texts from either stance and along this continuum.

Sociocultural theory views “learning as a social process and knowledge as a jointly constructed phenomenon” (Lyle, 2008, p. 279), meaning learning does not occur in isolation but through social interactions with others. Sociocultural theory draws heavily on the work of Vygotsky (1978), who first

recognized that knowledge was co-constructed through social interactions with others, and identified language as being the crucial form of this interaction. Sociocultural theory stresses the importance of classroom talk on students' learning and their ability to construct knowledge of the content at hand. Student discourse about texts is a significant focus of the *Information Circles* resource and "if we accept that the social world is a discursive construction then language is at the heart of cognitive activity and dialogue is the key to learning" (Lyle, 2008, p. 287). Likewise, discussion and sociocultural theories of learning are at the heart of *Information Circles*.

Finally, multiliteracies must also be addressed as a key part of the theoretical framework for this project, as it recognizes that literacy encompasses much more than reading, writing and speech. Multiliteracies require educators and researchers to expand on traditional notions of literacy pedagogy "to enable students to participate fully in our dynamic, technological and culturally diverse societies" (Mills, 2009, p. 103) and privilege multiple modes of representation including linguistic, visual, auditory, gestural, spatial and combined or multimodal representations of meaning (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Mills, 2009; New London Group, 1996). Cope and Kalantzis (2000), members of the New London Group, argue that multiliteracies must be addressed by educators and researchers alike because of an increasing integration of representational modes due to the explosion of mass media, and because of increasing global connectedness and the need to acknowledge cultural and linguistic diversity. Multiliteracy theorists do not negate the importance of linguistic texts, but "insist that written and spoken language should be understood as but two modes among many legitimate modes that can be integrated and used to convey meaning" (Alvermann & Wilson, 2011, p. 118). As the informational texts that students are exposed to are increasingly multimodal in nature (Mills, 2009), it is important that students receive instruction in reading and comprehending a wide variety of informational texts, not simply print-based texts. A multiliteracies approach to the *Information Circles* resource is necessary in order for students to gain competence obtaining information from a wide range of informational texts.

### **Informational Texts in Middle Schools**

The prevalence of informational texts (e.g., newspapers, emails, instructions, articles) in modern life necessitates the inclusion of these texts in classrooms from early primary through to high school. The ability to use and comprehend informational texts is “critical to success, and even survival, in advanced schooling, the workplace and community” (Duke, 2000, p. 202). Middle school students who have had little experience with informational texts often struggle with reading in their content area classes because they are trying to not only learn new information from their texts, but also the form and features of informational texts (Fang, 2008; Hall-Kenyon & Black, 2010; Moss, 2005; Ogle & Blachowicz, 2002). Further support for including informational text instruction in middle years’ classrooms is simply due to the fact that many students find informational texts motivating and enjoyable to read (Dreher, 2003; Guthrie & Davis, 2003; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Moss & Hendershot, 2002; Pitcher et al., 2007; Worthy, 2002) and that experience reading a variety of informational texts can help develop students’ background knowledge across a wide range of topics (Cameron, 2010; Moss, 2005; Moss & Hendershot, 2002; Ness, 2011; Ogle & Blachowicz, 2002). While most teachers agree that informational texts are an important part of the curriculum (Ness, 2011), instructional time constraints, curriculum demands and a lack of resources are significant obstacles preventing informational text from being included in classrooms with the prevalence that is necessary to facilitate competence with informational texts.

Despite these many benefits, middle years’ students and teachers report great variation in their access to informational materials in their language arts classrooms (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Ness, 2011; Pitcher et al., 2007; Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999). In a study that included 62 Grade 5 teachers across six states, Ness (2011) collected self-reported data from these teachers who reported spending an average of 50.4 minutes per day on instruction focused on informational texts. These teachers also reported that their classroom libraries contained an average of 35% of informational texts. However, these averages do not give us a complete picture of informational text instruction and availability in

middle years' classrooms. The range of time spent on informational text instruction self-reported by the teachers in this study ranged from 10 minutes per day to 100, and informational texts in classroom libraries ranged from 15-60% of the texts available to students. Ness' (2011) findings coincide with the two classrooms that Moss and Hendershot (2002) studied in their 2-year long study of sixth-graders engagement and response to nonfiction trade books. At the beginning of the study there were far more fiction texts in the classroom than nonfiction, and at the end of the study nonfiction texts composed approximately 40% of the classroom book collection. A multi-case study of seven struggling middle years' students from a variety of school settings found that comprehension of expository texts was a significant issue for each student in the study, yet none of these students were receiving instruction, support or interventions aimed at improving their comprehension of these texts (Pitcher et al., 2010). Finally, a study of three Canadian students and the print texts available in their classrooms found that 26% of texts in two separate classrooms were informational in nature (Cameron, 2010). There appears to be little consistency in the instruction of informational text strategies despite its inclusion in curriculum and standards documents from across North America (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2006a; NCTE, 1996). Unfortunately, too many educators believe that "if we just provide adequate basic skills, from that point forward kids with adequate background knowledge will be able to read anything successfully" (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008, p. 41), however students need more than basic reading skills to be successful with a wide range of texts. It has become increasingly evident that if we want our students to be able to successfully read and interact with informational texts, we need to provide them with experience and direct instruction on how to understand and use these texts (Duke & Pearson, 2002; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008; Vacca, Vacca, & Begoray, 2005), not just basic decoding, word recognition and comprehension skills.

Shanahan and Shanahan (2008) describe a pyramid model of literacy progression with three levels of literacy development. Basic skills of decoding, sight words, and fluency sit at the bottom of a

pyramid, followed by the intermediate skills of using generic comprehension strategies, addressing text structure, decoding multisyllabic words and fluency. At the top of the pyramid are specialized skills necessary for reading in specific disciplines. Middle years' teachers work with students who for the most part are adept with basic reading skills but need to refine their intermediate skills and develop disciplinary skills for success with more difficult reading tasks (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). This shift in the type of reading tasks students engage in as they progress through school correlates with a decline in student achievement beginning in Grade 4 which has been dubbed "the fourth-grade slump" (Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990). It appears that as the reading tasks get harder, more and more students struggle with understanding the texts they are assigned. Middle years' teachers must recognize this pattern and teach students strategies to help them read and understand these informational texts. A significant shift occurs in the types of reading tasks students are required to engage in as they move towards the middle grades; at about Grade 4 or 5, reading tasks begin to include more and more "reading to learn" activities using informational texts (Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990; Fang, 2008; Guthrie, Hoa, Wigfield, Tonks, Humenick, & Littles, 2007; Lee & Spratley, 2010) such as reading textbook chapters and completing research reports. Further, other scholars claim that by the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, 75% of texts students encounter in the classroom are informational in nature (Moss, 2004) despite a lack of experience reading and using these texts (Fang, 2008; Ness, 2011). Reading instruction too often stops around Grade 6 (Alexander & Fox, 2010), and high-level reading skills are rarely taught to students (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Therefore experience, with complex texts is crucial in middle school so that students have experience learning to read the types of texts they will see in high school. If strategies for reading informational texts are not taught in the intermediate and middle years' students may miss out on this important aspect of reading instruction altogether.

Several studies demonstrate that middle years' students enjoy experiences with informational texts and are capable of interacting with and learning content and form from these texts. Moss and

Hendershot (2002) examined two successive sixth-grade language arts classes in an elementary school over a period of two years and looked at the students' engagement and response to reading workshop activities when text choices included both fiction and nonfiction texts. The researchers used qualitative data collection techniques and analyzed student response journals, field notes, observations of book discussions and transcripts of student interviews to understand how students made decisions about reading selections. Students reported selecting titles for a variety of reasons including an interest in the topic, interesting visuals, personal connections to content and the recommendations of other readers. The results demonstrated that nonfiction text choices can help middle years' students develop a love of reading, develop their background knowledge, increase motivation to read, foster personal connections to text, and deepen students' interest in content area topics.

A study of sixth-grade science classrooms in a middle school that integrated comprehension strategy instruction and a science trade book home reading program with the science curriculum further demonstrated the potential that informational texts have for improving student motivation and achievement outcomes at the middle years' level. Fang, Lamme, Pringle, Patrick, Sanders, Zmach, Charbonnet and Henkel (2008), a team of literacy experts and science teachers, collaborated to devise a reading infusion program in an attempt to enhance the science learning of sixth-grade students at a middle school in the southeastern United States. Six classes of science students received the reading infusion program which consisted of one 15-20 minutes strategy lesson per week and a home reading program that allowed students to select one science trade book to take home per week. Four science classes received no intervention. The middle school science teachers received significant amounts of mentorship, professional development and support in order to learn how to integrate the reading strategies effectively. Students' general reading ability was measured using the Gates-McGinitie Reading test, students' knowledge of science content was measured at the beginning and end of the year using a curriculum referenced science test, and students' science course marks were collected. This

data was analyzed using statistical analysis. Results indicated that students who received the reading infusion program demonstrated significant gains in science literacy skills over the course of the year and outperformed the students who did not receive the instruction across both the fundamental (general science reading ability) and derived (specific science content knowledge) senses of science literacy. Fang et al.'s study demonstrated that reading and science content instruction can be integrated successfully when teachers are provided with the necessary support, resources and time to allow for a change in classroom practice, and that students are capable of improving both reading skills and content knowledge simultaneously.

Cameron (2010) conducted a multi-case study of three striving readers' perceptions of informational texts and the situated literacy environments of each of these students. The participants in this study were three striving readers in Grades 4-6 from 2 different classrooms in a private school located in a Canadian urban Maritime city. Cameron described striving readers as "readers who are learning to read but who are having some difficulty...with vocabulary fluency and/or comprehension" (p. 13). She collected data through semi-structured interviews with student participants, written teacher responses about each student, parent responses about each child, and counts/classifications of print materials in classroom and school libraries to determine the experience with and access to informational texts in each student's home and school experience. The results indicated that all three students had positive perceptions of informational texts particularly with respect to the themes of personal interest/enjoyment of informational texts, and the function and attributes of informational texts in their literary lives. This study further demonstrated that middle years' students are interested in and capable of interacting with informational texts, especially when the content is enjoyable and interesting to read. It is clear that if we want all our students to become purposeful, strategic, engaged, readers, then teachers must include not only more informational texts in their classrooms, but also provide more and better instruction in how to read and understand the complex language and

structures found in these texts. The literature that follows in the next section, addresses best practice in adolescent literacy instruction identifies some key components of literacy instruction in middle years' classrooms regarding the use and instruction of informational texts.

### **Best Practices in Adolescent Literacy**

The idea that adolescence is a significant transition in an individual's life is widely regarded as fact. Not only do adolescents experience significant physical, cognitive and social changes during this period, their school experiences are also changing as they move from elementary to middle to high school (Alexander & Fox, 2010). It is important for educators to recognize that adolescents have different learning needs than younger students and plan accordingly. Developmentally appropriate teaching practices are essential for all students. Middle years' students are uniquely situated at the beginning of this transitional period, and as such are addressed in the literature as both late-elementary students and young adolescents. The discussion that follows identifies specific changes in adolescent that impact literacy development, as well as teaching practices that are found in exemplary adolescent literacy classrooms and schools.

Physical changes in adolescence affect both the body and brain. As the brain matures, adolescents acquire control of executive function skills which include selective attention, decision making skills, and working memory (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006; Yurgelun-Todd, 2007). Cognitive processing skills develop affecting reasoning and abstract thought capabilities (Alexander & Fox, 2010; Berk, 2002). These brain developments have far-reaching implications for the types of reading tasks adolescents will be capable of participating in. Alexander and Fox (2010) note that these changes to the adolescent brain allow for adolescents to regulate their thinking, notice errors/inconsistencies in texts, think inferentially and recognize and use text features, which facilitate adolescents' abilities to comprehend texts on a much deeper level than was previously possible. Socially, adolescence is defined by a period of increasing autonomy and orientation to peers (Alexander & Fox, 2010; Berk, 2002). These

changes affect reading habits, interests, social roles and identity which educators must be aware of when attempting to use and design literacy programs that motivate students. It is important to be aware that middle years' students are often in the midst of all these changes and are in need of literacy instruction that attempts to address and use these changes rather than work against them (Neilsen, 2006). It is also important to note that not all adolescents experience these physical, cognitive changes at the same time or at the same rate (Berk, 2002), which necessitates differentiated instruction in order to meet the needs of all the learners during this period of transition.

So, what does good literacy instruction for adolescents look like? Regardless of the resources used, there are key features of effective literacy programs that result in high levels of student growth and achievement. There appears to be agreement amongst scholars recognizing that adolescents have often been overlooked when it comes to funding literacy programs and research projects; much more money has been spent on early literacy (Alvermann, 2002; Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Cantrell, Almasi, Carter, Rintamaa, & Madden, 2010; NCTE, 2006), and it is only in recent years that adolescent literacy concerns have begun to receive the attention they deserve (Alexander & Fox, 2010). While there is still much work required in this field, a clear pattern emerges from the literature discussed in the next section that identifies practices scholars agree are essential for improving adolescent literacy rates. The *Information Circles* approach attempts to weave these best practices together in its approach to teaching informational text reading skills.

The NCTE policy research briefs (NCTE, 2006, 2007) attempt to draw attention to the fact that middle and high school students are struggling to acquire the complex literacy skills that are required to become effective citizens in our information-driven economy (Alvermann, 2002; Mills, 2009) while providing research-based principles of quality adolescent literacy instruction. The NCTE stresses the importance of motivation in adolescent literacy instruction and claims that “without a curriculum that fosters qualities of motivation and engagement, adolescents risk becoming under-literate” (2006, p. 5),

echoing the research of Guthrie and Davis (2003) who also call for educators to engage adolescent learners in classroom practice. The NCTE policy brief (2006) suggests reforming adolescent literacy practices to increase motivation through strategy instruction, use of diverse texts and student self-selection of texts. Further, the brief calls for instructional strategies that target comprehension, critical thinking and classroom-based assessment practices. Finally, the NCTE (2006) claims that improving teacher expertise through professional development, interdisciplinary collaboration and use of literacy coaches will have the greatest impact on adolescent literacy rates. All teachers must be confident and capable of teaching literacy skills to their students regardless of their area of expertise.

In their report, *Reading Next – A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy*, Biancarosa and Snow (2006) also recognize that while literacy demands of the adult world are increasing, literacy rates in the US are not and they suggest 15 elements of effective adolescent literacy programs. These authors also note that literacy initiatives have often neglected adolescents and that poor reading comprehension skills are the central issue in this literacy crisis. Research-based instructional elements of literacy programs include explicit comprehension instruction, integration of content and process, self-directed learning, collaborative learning, differentiation based on student needs, diverse texts, intensive writing, technology integration and formative assessment (pp. 13-20). Biancarosa and Snow also identify the following improvements to middle and secondary school infrastructure that would positively affect literacy rates: extended time for literacy, professional development of teachers, ongoing program and student assessment, teacher teams, quality leadership and literacy programs that are comprehensive and coordinated (pp. 20-22). While teachers are not expected to implement all 15 elements at once, this report is intended to be used as guide or “vision” of what adolescent literacy programs should and could look like.

While the above policy documents are based on data indicating a crisis in the state of literacy levels of American middle and high school students, there is no reason to believe that the

recommendations for research-based adolescent literacy programs in the above documents are not also important for Canadian students. Research-based practices are beneficial to all students regardless of their literacy achievement scores. Until there is more research focusing specifically on Canadian students we must do the best we can to apply the findings of American students where similarities exist. However, Canadian data does indicate high levels of literacy achievement amongst adolescents according to the 2009 Programme for International Assessment (PISA) results. This assessment was administered to 15-year olds across 65 countries including 23,000 students in all 10 Canadian provinces (Knighton, Brochu, & Gluszynski, 2010). Canadian students' mean scores on reading assessments were only significantly outperformed by 4 countries and were well above the Organisation for Cooperation and Development's (OECD) average, while United States scores hovered near the OECD average. Results indicated that 89.9% of Canadian adolescents have at least a baseline level of reading proficiency "at which students begin to demonstrate the reading literacy competencies that will enable them to participate productively and effectively in life" (Knighton, Brochu, & Gluszynski, 2010, p. 20). Despite these relatively high levels of reading literacy achievement, 1 in 10 Canadian adolescents struggle to achieve necessary baseline literacy skills, and the proportion of high literacy achievers has declined to 40% of adolescents from 45% on the 2000 PISA assessment. Therefore, it is essential that Canadian educators and researchers continue to evaluate adolescent literacy practices in our schools and make changes accordingly. The next two studies, while still based on American students, suggest that comprehension concerns, particularly with informational texts may be one of the root causes of literacy struggles in middle and high school, which coincides with the Canadian and American research on the importance of informational texts in schools discussed previously (Cameron, 2010; Fang et al., 2008; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Moss & Hendershot, 2002; Ness, 2011; Pitcher et al., 2007; Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999).

Santa (2006) identifies comprehension as central to the adolescent literacy problem; Santa is the co-owner of a boarding school for troubled teens and former president of the International Reading Association (IRA). She identifies four research-based principles that compose her vision for adolescent literacy that have had the greatest impact on the literacy learning of her students. These include a classroom community that focuses on building relationships, direct strategy instruction with teacher modeling, internalizing principles of learning (including metacognition, recognizing background knowledge, purposeful reading, organization, active persistence, writing and discussion), and developing professional expertise amongst teachers. She calls for teachers to balance process and content and to recognize and teach to individual student needs rather than tests and standards. Her vision is admirable, but may require an overhaul of traditional educational policy and procedure in order to be fully implemented.

Finally, Pitcher, Martinez, Dicembre, Fewster & McCormick's (2010) multi-case study profiled seven struggling adolescent readers in order to attempt to determine what type of instruction adolescents need in order to grow as readers. The authors assessed the reading levels of these seven middle grade students, interviewed the students and their parents and looked at the literacy programs used by their schools to create a snapshot or literacy profile of each individual. They found that reading comprehension was a concern for all students in the study, particularly with expository texts, yet none of these students was receiving any instruction of comprehension strategies in their respective schools. From the information delineated from these cases, the authors recommend explicit instruction of comprehension strategies, increased time for student self-selected reading, and utilizing online resources and technology as practices to improve adolescent literacy rates in middle schools. They recognized that it was particularly important for middle years' students to receive instruction that would help them understand their content area texts.

Several key themes emerge from looking at these key documents and studies that address best practices in adolescent literacy: there appears to be a significant amount of agreement and overlap in what quality instruction for adolescent looks like. It is important to note that professional development and teacher expertise are addressed by all the above researchers as even the best practices, programs and interventions will make very little difference in student achievement if teachers do not deliver them effectively. The key themes that are reiterated by all the above literacy experts include explicit comprehension strategy instruction, extended time for literacy, inclusion of a range of diverse texts, managed student choice and student talk centered on texts. While the aforementioned studies and documents address these principles from different perspectives, they are all identified in discussions as best practices for adolescent literacy. The resource *Information Circles* has been specifically designed with these principles in mind. The next section will address each of these principles in depth.

#### **Extended time for literacy.**

Teachers and researchers are not the only parties interested in determining how classroom time should be used. Students have a lot to say about how they best learn to read in their classrooms. Ivey and Broaddus (2001) surveyed 1,765 Grade 6 students and found that they valued independent reading time more than any other classroom activity. Other studies have also found that middle years' students show a desire to spend more time reading interesting informational texts (Cameron, 2010; Pitcher et al., 2007; Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999). Students recognized that being given ample time to read in class was a valuable way to spend classroom time and reported that having more time to spend reading gave them a chance to think about and understand the text at hand. These findings coincide with research that suggests that the amount of time spent reading any type of text is associated with significant gains in reading comprehension achievement (Allington, 2002a; Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1998; Guthrie, Hoa, et al., 2007; Guthrie, Schafer, & Huang, 2001; Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 2000). Allington's (2002a) team of researchers studied exemplary teachers for 10 years and found

quality time spent reading to be one of six major factors affecting student growth in reading and writing proficiency. The panel Biancarosa and Snow (2006) worked with while crafting *Reading Next* suggested that adolescents should spend 2-4 hours a day engaged in literacy activities. This much time for literacy requires integration across all subject areas, something that has proven difficult in middle and secondary school classrooms. While these studies refer to reading in general, and not specifically to informational texts, they do demonstrate that any program that is going to be of value in developing students' reading skills must provide students with ample amounts of time with their eyes firmly fixed on text. The *Information Circles* approach is designed to give students the time they need to read informational texts that interest and engage them in response to the call for more classroom time to be spent "just plain reading" (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001, p. 350). However, in addition to this time spent reading, students also need explicit instruction on using comprehension strategies with informational texts, which I address in the next section.

#### **Explicit comprehension instruction.**

Clearly, there is agreement that comprehension is central to adolescents' reading achievement and that the explicit teaching of comprehension strategies is an essential practice for teachers to include in their instruction (Allington, 2002a; Alvermann, 2002; Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Brown, 2009; Cantrell, et al., 2010; Conley, 2008; Duke & Carlisle, 2010; Duke & Pearson, 2002; Fisher & Frey, 2008; Guthrie & Davis, 2003; Guthrie, Schafer, & Huang, 2001; NCTE, 2006, 2007; Pitcher et al., 2010; Santa, 2006; Tovani, 2004; Wharton-McDonald & Swiger, 2009). Afflerbach, Pearson and Paris (2008) define strategies as "deliberate, conscious metacognitive act[s]" (p. 368) that readers use to help themselves construct meaning from text, while Conley (2008) describes cognitive strategy instruction as "constructive interactions with texts, both written and digital, in which good readers and writers continuously create meaning" (p. 84). Essentially, strategy instruction researchers claim that proficient readers use a range of strategies in their attempts to make sense of texts and that these strategies can

be taught to all readers in an attempt to increase proficiency (Duke & Pearson, 2002). One of the goals of strategy instruction in middle years' classrooms must be the consolidation of strategies, whereby readers are able select and use the right strategy at appropriate times in authentic reading situations (Afflerbach, Pearson, & Paris, 2008; Fisher & Frey, 2008). With respect to strategy instruction, Afflerbach, Pearson, and Paris (2008) state "the general rule is teach children many strategies, teach them early, reteach them often and connect assessment with teaching" (p. 371), echoing the consistent findings of strategy research during the last 30 years (Dole, Duffy, Roehler, & Pearson, 1991; Keene & Zimmerman, 2007; Paris, Lipson, & Wixson, 1983; Pearson, 2009; Pearson & Duke, 2002; Pearson & Fielding, 1991; Pressley, 2000). Research in strategy instruction has exploded rapidly in the last 30 years in part because of the vast agreement and little controversy in the literature (Duke & Pearson, 2002; Pearson, 2010). However, there is somewhat less clarity on how and when and by whom this strategy instruction should occur in the middle grades (Brown, 2009; Conley, 2008; Duke & Carlisle, 2010; Wharton-McDonald & Swiger, 2009), especially as students move from having one classroom teacher responsible for the whole curriculum to multiple teachers responsible for different subject areas. While decoding, fluency and word recognition instruction become much less of an instructional focus in the middle years, comprehension instruction must continue in the middle years and beyond as texts and classroom demands become more complex. In the section that follows, I specifically address the research on reading comprehension instruction as it applies to readers of informational texts.

### ***Comprehension strategies.***

The strategies that expert readers employ to aid comprehension of informational texts include the following:

- accessing background knowledge to make connections (Brown, 2002; Conley, 2008; Duke & Pearson, 2002; Gear, 2008; Keene & Zimmerman, 2007; Pressley, 2000; Wharton-McDonald & Swiger, 2009),

- asking and answering questions (Brown, 2002; Cantrell, et al., 2010; Conley, 2008; Duke & Pearson, 2002; Gear, 2008; Keene & Zimmerman, 2007; Pressley, 2000; Wharton-McDonald & Swiger, 2009),
- predicting and making inferences (Alvermann & Wilson, 2011; Brown, 2002; Duke & Pearson, 2002; Harvey & Goudvis, 2007; Keene & Zimmerman, 2007; Wharton-McDonald & Swiger, 2009),
- creating visual representations of text (Brown, 2002; Conley, 2008; Duke & Pearson, 2002; Fordham, Wellman, & Sandman, 2002; Pressley, 2000; Wharton-McDonald & Swiger, 2009)
- identifying main ideas and summarizing (Alvermann & Wilson, 2011; Brown, 2002; Cantrell et al., 2010; Conley, 2008; Duke & Pearson, 2002; Gear, 2008; Harvey & Goudvis, 2007; Keene & Zimmerman, 2007; Ogle & Blachowicz, 2002; Pressley, 2000; Wharton-McDonald & Swiger),
- synthesizing new learning and existing knowledge across texts (Alvermann & Wilson, 2011; Cantrell et al., 2010; Conley, 2008; Fisher & Frey, 2008; Massey & Heafner, 2004; Ogle & Blachowicz, 2002; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008; Tovani, 2004) and
- analyzing text structure and features (Brown, 2002; Duke & Pearson, 2002; Fang, 2008; Gear, 2007; Moss, 2005; Ogle & Blachowicz, 2002).

Good readers know how to access and use the appropriate strategy at the appropriate time (Fisher & Frey, 2008) to aid in their comprehension of the text at hand. However, several researchers (Cantrell et al., 2010; Conley, 2008; Fisher & Frey, 2008) caution against isolating strategies and teaching them individually for several weeks at a time, as this practice is not reflective of mature reading practice. Therefore, “it is imperative that instruction focus on preparing readers not simply to use strategies, but to be strategic” (Cantrell et al., 2010, p. 258). This skill requires readers to be metacognitive – able to monitor their own understanding, set goals for reading and use fix-up strategies when meaning breaks

down (Cantrell et al., 2010; Conley, 2008; Fisher & Frey, 2008; Keene & Zimmerman & 2007; Wharton-McDonald & Swiger, 2009). As discussed previously, readers must be provided with explanation, modeling, guided collaborative practice and time to independently practice and integrate these strategies themselves in order to become a successful reader of informational texts. Cantrell et al., (2010) posit: “successful reading, then, depends on the reader’s ability to monitor his or her construction of meaning and to flexibly use cognitive strategies” (p. 258) that support advanced reading comprehension abilities. The next section addresses the need for adolescents to have experience reading a variety of text types which they can apply the comprehension strategies discussed above to.

#### **Diverse texts.**

There is fairly wide agreement that textbooks should not be the only resources students use in their content area classrooms, but they are often relied on far too heavily (Allington 2002b; Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Tovani, 2004; Villano, 2005). It is important that we expand on our notion of classroom texts beyond textbooks, especially in the content areas as students need experiences reading a variety of informational text genres (Villano, 2005). This expansion must be addressed across two dimensions: the accessibility and the diversity of classroom texts. Accessibility must be addressed because many middle and high school students struggle with the demands of textbook reading for two distinct reasons (Allington, 2002b; Fisher & Ivey, 2005; Moss, 2005; Tovani, 2004): they lack the background knowledge necessary to understand new content, and the reading demands of the textbooks are simply too difficult (Fang, 2008; Guthrie & Davis, 2003; Villano, 2005). Scholars agree that we must provide our students with multiple, accessible texts so that students have numerous sources from which to learn the content required (Allington, 2002b; Draper, 2008; Fisher & Ivey, 2005; Tovani, 2004), and that “by explicitly expanding the range of kinds of texts that students read in content area courses, teachers can actually expand opportunities to learn content knowledge” (Lee & Spratley, 2010, p. 16). Fisher and Ivey (2005) argue that “none of the strategies we know will really help students who cannot yet read a substantial

portion of the words in a text” (p. 5), so it is imperative that we include texts in our classrooms that are accessible to *all* our readers.

Secondly, the diversity of texts used in content area classrooms must be addressed as there is a need to expand our notion of classroom texts beyond the traditional language-based texts such as textbooks and articles. Wade and Moje (2000) define texts as “organized networks that people generate or use to make meaning for themselves or for others” (p. 610), which can be linguistic, visual, auditory, gestural, spatial or multimodal in nature (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Mills, 2009; New London Group, 1996). Alvermann and Wilson (2011) believe comprehension instruction must expand across all “notions of texts that include gestures, images, models, numbers, the natural world” (p. 123) and any imaginable combination of these and other modes. For example, multimodal classroom texts may include oral discussions, speeches, music, dramatic presentations, dance, advertisements, posters, articles, emails, websites, trade books, models and natural settings. This broad reimagining of texts is important as experience with a wide variety of text types can provide students with multiple ways to access and represent content knowledge, enabling teachers to differentiate their instruction according to the needs of their students. Further, a broad range of texts is particularly important in the content area classes. In science classrooms, visual texts are used frequently, such as models, diagrams, photographs, iconic representations and the physical world itself, and students must be able to read each of these texts in order to understand a variety of scientific principles (Alvermann & Wilson, 2011; Lee & Spratley, 2010). Similarly, in social studies, students must be able to read and compare photographs, music, and primary documents (Alvermann & Wilson, 2011; Lee & Spratley, 2010). In short, students need texts they can read and they need experience with a wide variety of text types in order to be able to understand and think critically about the content they will encounter both in their content area classrooms and in their lives outside of school.

Villano's (2005) research provides support for using a range of text types to teach content area subject matter. Villano noticed that her Grade 5 students had difficulty understanding information in their Grade 5 social studies textbooks. She recognized that her students were experiencing difficulties with both the content and language demands of their social studies textbooks, in part because she surmised they had had few experiences with expository text. Villano (2005) carried out a qualitative action research project with her own Grade 5 students that introduced supplemental texts to teach American history content that included illustrated storybooks, poems and students' own representations of content. These multimodal texts were intended to provide students with multiple ways to access difficult content without having to navigate the difficult language of the textbook. Villano found that these supplemental materials improved students' recall of facts and information, and students' abilities to make inferences about the texts that demonstrated a deeper understanding of historical events.

Alvermann and Wilson (2011) describe a middle years' science teacher's experiences using multimodal science texts while teaching explicit comprehension strategies. Students made connections, predictions and inferences about erosion while viewing an example of erosion on their school campus. These students also used texts in a variety of modes including photographs, diagrams and models to develop an understanding of the phases of the moon and to understand how the phases are affected by the relationship between the position of the earth, sun and moon. These multimodal text experiences enabled students to access and understand difficult content across several meaning modes, and gave students experiences with a range of text types rather than only traditional, linguistically-based texts. This study demonstrated that while it is important for students to be able to extract literal and construct inferential meanings from print-based texts, they must also be able to use strategies to understand the multimodal texts they experience in and out of school (Alvermann & Wilson, 2011). It is with this broad

imagining of texts that I approach this project and the *Information Circles* resource described in Chapter 3.

### **Choice.**

Another principle of adolescent literacy that must be addressed is choice. Adolescents crave choice and control and “seek to be in command of their environment, rather than be manipulated by powerful others” (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000, p. 411). They are trying on new roles, and becoming more independent (Alexander & Fox, 2010), and require instruction that provides choice in order for them to become self-directed, autonomous learners (Guthrie & Davis, 2003; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Teachers who are revered as highly motivating capitalize on this desire for choice and recognize that “choice is motivating because it affords student control” (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000, p. 411). Motivation is a key factor in adolescent achievement; the inclusion of opportunities for students to have choice and control over their reading selections and activities can lead to deeper interest and higher levels of motivation which in turn can result in higher levels of comprehension (Guthrie, Hoa, et al., 2007). Teachers must recognize that motivational contexts for reading instruction can be beneficial to adolescents as students cannot learn to read if they are reluctant to even pick up and engage in text.

One instructional change that students themselves indicate affects their motivation to read is choice in reading materials (Guthrie, Hoa et al., 2007; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Pitcher, et al., 2007). As reported above, Ivey and Broaddus (2001) found that the overwhelming majority of Grade 6 students studied (63% of respondents), valued personal/free choice reading time more than any other reading activity, and that students’ worst reading experiences were related to assigned in-class reading. Pitcher et al. (2007) revised the motivation to read profile (MRP) (Gambrell, Palmer, Codling & Mazzoni, 1996) to be used with adolescents (AMRP) and assessed 385 adolescents in the United States and Caribbean. One theme that emerged from the surveys and interviews was the importance of choice in students’ literacy experience. Students reported that they enjoyed choosing books and topics/formats of

projects, and that they wanted teachers to take their preferences and interests into account when selecting assigned readings. Similarly, students in Guthrie, Hoa et al.'s (2007) study that looked at motivational factors and their effects on reading comprehension, found that students most often preferred to be in control of their reading choices. Perceived control was a significant motivational factor in this study and "the purpose of control, as expressed by students, was to enable them to maintain reading activity in high-interest domains" (Guthrie, Hoa et al., 2007, p. 295). Further, Pitcher et al. (2007) assert that, "by acknowledging students' reading interests and building on them, teachers can help students expand those interests to related topics over time" (p. 395). It appears that if students have some perceived control over reading selections and can choose reading selections that they find interesting and engaging, reading comprehension improves. Providing students with choice in reading selection is a simple way for teachers to demonstrate that they recognize that all students have different reading needs and interests in an attempt to increase the likeliness that students will be engaged in the texts at hand. *Information Circles* takes this need for choice into consideration by providing a variety of text types and topics for students to choose from.

#### **Student talk centered on texts.**

The final adolescent literacy practice that builds the foundation for *Information Circles* is student talk centered on texts. It is important to recognize the importance of talk in the middle years' classrooms as it is valuable for several reasons. Students who participated in group discussions about texts have demonstrated both improved comprehension of texts (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003; Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Duke & Carlisle, 2010; Lyle, 2008; Murphy, Wilkinson, Soter, Hennessey, & Alexander, 2009; Pantaleo, 2011) and increased engagement in classroom activities (Guthrie & Davis, 2003; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Lyle 2008). While Biancarosa and Snow (2006) call for student-led text based discussions, Duke and Carlisle (2010) argue that it does not matter who leads, and that "effective involvement in discussions, whether led by students or teachers becomes

increasingly important for participation in learning, not only in language arts but in other content areas as well” (p. 213). Further, Allington’s (2002a) research on exemplary classrooms observed that “exemplary teachers, encouraged, modeled and supported lots of talk across the school day” (p. 744). Two types of classroom talk are important within the context of the *Information Circles* resource: exploratory and collaborative talk. Both type of talk can positively affect student achievement and understanding of informational texts.

Barnes (2008) claims that that talk is an effective way for students to construct their own understanding of the concepts and ideas as speech is a flexible and easily revised medium in comparison to written or representational response forms (Barnes, 2008). Further, she advocates for exploratory talk as an avenue for constructing understanding, as exploratory talk is characterized by the speaker being able to sort through new ideas and their own thoughts through which may be hesitant, broken or slower than a polished presentation. The purpose of exploratory talk is to provide “an important means of working on understanding” (Barnes, 2008, p. 5), but students must be in a safe and comfortable environment in order to use it effectively. When we consider the notion of exploratory talk as applied to constructing an understanding of texts, it is important that the texts students read are replete with information and ideas that require students to work to construct and understanding. Pantaleo (2011) acknowledged that “student engagement in genuine conversations about literature” (p. 274) was essential in order to build an interpretive learning community. Students need engaging texts in order to have anything worthwhile to talk about.

Collaborative talk is another form of classroom talk relevant to the *Information Circles* resource. Lyle (2008) describes collaborative talk as “students working together to use talk as a meaning making strategy to achieve common goals” (p. 279). She argues that when students participate in dialogic exchange (p. 279), they are able to actively construct meaning from the content of the discussion at hand. During collaborative talk, learners co-construct meaning together through talking to one another,

which is the exact intent of the discussion circles component of *Information Circles*. Students participating in *Information Circles* will meet together to discuss central ideas, themes concepts and so on in a common informational text in order to reach a deeper understanding of it together. Lyle (2008) also acknowledges that the task design of collaborative classroom talk is crucial to its success. She calls for tasks to be somewhat open-ended so that learners can “impose meanings, make judgments [and] propose multiple solutions” (p. 282), which ultimately results in the learners’ co-constructed knowledge. Without these collaborative talk experiences, learners may not come to the same conclusions about the content of the texts, which may hinder their understanding.

It is important to note that while the benefits of using talk centered around texts in the classroom are many, poor implementation can render these talking opportunities ineffective. As mentioned above, task design is critical, as students need dynamic topics and engaging materials to respond to collaboratively (Lyle, 2008). Also, students need sufficient, preparation, guidance and supervision within talking tasks as they likely do not have the necessary skills to participate in collaborative talk without direct instruction (Barnes, 2008). It may seem time consuming but time spent teaching students discussion etiquette skills (e.g., how to disagree appropriately, how to add on to someone’s idea) can be very beneficial later on (Pantaleo, 2011). Often, when collaborative talk fails to achieve its intended goals, the cause may simply be that students lacked the necessary skills to effectively participate in collaborative talk with one another. As with the other best practices for adolescent literacy, direct instruction in the required skills is essential for success.

The best practices of adolescent instruction are only the first component of the literature that supports the resource described in Chapter 3, *Information Circles*. The next section describes research in the area of content area literacy and how it relates to *Information Circles*.

### **Reading to Learn (Content Area Literacy)**

Much of the research supporting the need to teach reading skills and strategies to older students is found under the umbrella of content area literacy, which has not always been a well-received concept by content area teachers (Ivey & Fisher, 2005; O'Brien, Stewart, & Moje, 1995; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008; Tovani, 2004; Vacca, 2002). Traditionally, content area literacy has been interpreted as a package of strategies that teachers provide to their students in an attempt to help them better understand their content area textbooks (Stevens, 2002). A broader view of content area literacy and content area texts is necessary in light of the instructional resource *Information Circles*. It is important to redefine these terms in ways that place students at the centre of their learning rather than the teacher or text (Stevens, 2002) and views "students engaged in authentic literacy tasks, tasks that build their content knowledge and their interest in reading and writing" (Fisher & Ivey, 2005, p. 6). Teachers must assess which skills students need to work on and provide instruction and experiences that help students to master these skills. Thus, contrary to traditional notions of content area instruction, "learning to read doesn't end in the elementary grades. Reading becomes more complex as students move into middle and high schools and teachers need to help students understand difficult texts" (Tovani, 2004, p. 5), regardless of whether or not each teacher considers themselves to be a teacher of reading (Vacca, Vacca, & Begoray, 2005).

There is some discussion in the literature that advocates for a move away from the term content area literacy entirely and for the field to be re-envisioned simply as adolescent literacy (Stevens, 2002) in part because of the traditional textbook based focus of content area literacy. However, these scholars do call for advanced literacy instruction to be included in all classrooms (Draper, 2008; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). While it is important that the best practices of adolescent literacy (as described above) be included in content area classrooms, it may be hasty to throw away the term content area literacy entirely. For the most part, many middle schools, and certainly all secondary schools separate

classes by content area divisions, and specialist teachers are experts in their individual content areas. Perhaps instead, the idea of content area literacy needs to be redefined to include the best practices of adolescent literacy, but also needs to recognize that each subject area requires students to use specific skill-sets to become competent. Content area teachers need to become experts on teaching literacy in their subject area (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008; Tovani, 2004) and in this way adolescent literacy practices can be applied across the entire curriculum, and not just in language arts classrooms.

Simply defined, content area literacy is “the processes and skills necessary to read and write in the content areas” (Stevens, 2002, p. 267) and has largely consisted of teaching students specific strategies for reading their content area textbooks (i.e. social studies, science, math, etc.). Its main focus has been on middle and high school students and has a long history of being poorly implemented in classrooms (Alger, 2007; Bean, 2000; Draper, 2008; Fisher & Ivey, 2005; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). In traditional classrooms, content area instruction centers on the teacher and textbook as authoritative voices on the subject matter, transmitting knowledge to students (O’Brien, Stewart, & Moje, 1995; Stevens, 2002). The goal of instruction is often subject specific skill mastery and content recall (Wade & Moje, 2000), which are not the only abilities our students need to possess. Successful citizenship in today’s society requires a much more dynamic set of skills that includes critical thinking, problem solving and working collaboratively with others (Mills, 2009; New London Group, 1996; Wade & Moje, 2000). Therefore, it is necessary to take a much a broader view of content area literacy, one that moves away from a transmission model of teaching and learning and moves towards a participatory model where students are required to “generate their own knowledge and make their own interpretations of texts” (Wade & Moje, 2000, p. 617). Literacy educators call for content area texts that “engage students with multiple forms of representation and expression,” (Draper, 2008, p. 70) and privilege more than simply print-based notions of literacy. This act requires teaching our students an array of strategies for finding and understanding information not only in print-based texts (including textbooks), but also in digital,

visual and multimedia texts. Content area literacy must be redefined to include instructional strategies that foster student-directed and cooperative learning (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008; Stevens, 2002) and “support the view that students construct and co-construct knowledge through activities such as discussion and reading and writing from multiple perspectives” (Fisher & Ivey, 2005, p. 5). It is with this definition of content area literacy that I approached my project, and designed my resource.

### **Why is content area reading difficult?**

There are several reasons why most students find reading in the content areas challenging. Lee and Spratley (2010) for example identify several characteristics of what are sometimes called “inconsiderate texts” (p. 8) that students in content area classes are often required to read: texts that fail to connect ideas together, texts that use ambiguous references, texts that include irrelevant information and texts that contain a high frequency of dense sentences. Further, content area texts often contain ideas and information that are unfamiliar to students, include text features that are difficult to navigate and use complex linguistic conventions (Fang, 2006). These factors combine to make content area reading comprehension difficult, especially for struggling readers. Finally, the reading level of assigned texts is often far above that of the students (Allington, 2002b) especially for students of mixed ability with learning disabilities and general reading difficulties. Lee and Spratley (2010) conclude that

more and less competent adolescent readers will continue to struggle with both textbooks as well as primary source documents until explicit attention to text features, prior knowledge, vocabulary, comprehension monitoring and processes become routine practices in classrooms where students are expected to read in order to learn. (p. 9)

Whatever texts are being used in content area classrooms, the following characteristics of informational texts need to be acknowledged and addressed by teachers in order to combat the difficulties of content area reading.

The language and linguistic conventions used in content area texts affect comprehension as these conventions are often more complex than students are familiar with (Fang, 2006, 2008a; Hall-Kenyon, & Black, 2010; Lee & Spratley, 2010). The first of these conventions is the nominalization of verbs and adjectives that makes sentences more difficult to understand. This nominalization often occurs in technical scientific writing (Fang, 2006; Fang, 2008a; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). For example, the noun *investigation* is used in place of the verb *to investigate*, as in 'the scientist conducted an investigation into the properties of matter' versus 'the scientist investigated the properties of matter'. The language of the first sentence is more complex, thus making it more difficult to read. A similar process occurs with adjectives in technical writing. For example, in everyday language, the word *significant* is used as an adjective as in 'we made a significant finding while exploring the riverbed.' When the adjective 'significant' is nominalized, it can be expanded upon and by the author as in 'the incredible significance of the riverbed discovery is a cause for concern amongst scientists.' These nominalized verbs and adjectives require more abstract thinking by the reader and texts that use a lot of these nouns can affect students' comprehension (Fang, Schleppergrell, & Cox, 2006).

Abstract vocabulary and words with specific meanings in content area applications further add to content area reading difficulties. For example, reading in mathematics requires readers to recognize that words may have different meanings and usages than they typically encounter. Simple prepositions (of, as, is, by, and, from) have precise definitions in mathematics. Further, vocabulary words such as *product*, *difference*, *power* and *rational* all have mathematical definitions far removed than their typical every day usages that students are familiar with (Burns, 2006; Phillips, Bardsley, Bach, & Gibbs-Brown, 2009). The same phenomenon occurs with science texts. Words such as *school*, *fault*, or *volume* are common in students' everyday vernacular but have vastly different meanings in scientific contexts (Fang, 2006). These words that have both every day and content specific meanings can cause difficulty for good and poor readers alike as they attack their content area expository texts.

In a similar vein, unfamiliar technical vocabulary can cause just as many difficulties as familiar words with unfamiliar meanings. These are vocabulary words that one typically finds in bold face text, in indices/glossaries, or explained/illustrated in text boxes and diagrams in school texts (Fang, 2006). For example, the British Columbia Science IRP (2005) for Grade 6 science lists micro-organism, invertebrate, vertebrate, species, nucleus, chloroplasts and mimicry as some of the key vocabulary in the Diversity of Life unit, all of which are potentially unfamiliar words for most students. A high concentration of these subject-specific vocabulary words in a single sentence or paragraph increases the information density of a text. Dense sentences can overwhelm even proficient readers and comprehension breaks down as they attempt to process the meanings of numerous unfamiliar words at one time (Fang, 2006; Wharton-Macdonald & Swiger, 2009). It becomes very difficult to use context clues to aid comprehension when there are numerous unfamiliar words in one sentence. Density can impede comprehension in expository texts when words and concepts are unknown by students. The internal features that define informational texts also add to the complexity of reading in the content areas (Ogle & Blachowicz, 2002). Internal text features “provide students with a map that guides them through a text” (Moss, 2004, p. 712) and are used by authors to organize information in a text in logical or interesting ways. Students must be able to determine the internal text structure (e.g., description, definition, sequence, cause/effect, problem/solution, compare/contrast) of a particular piece of text and recognize the relationship between the structure and the information contained within the text (Hall-Kenyon & Black, 2010). For example, an article about religion in ancient civilizations might discuss similarities and differences between gods in Ancient Egypt and Greece. Good readers recognize that the internal structure of the article as a compare/contrast structure which helps them to organize the information in their mind as they read through the article. Certain words can help clue readers into what internal structure a particular text embodies. If readers recognize that a sequence uses words

such as first, next, and last, they can recognize the internal structure more quickly, in order to determine the purpose of a piece of text.

Moss (2004) proposes expository text retellings of informational trade books as a means for familiarizing readers with internal text structure and therefore improving students' expository text comprehension. She describes retellings as "post reading recalls during which children relate what they remember from reading or listening to a text" (Moss, 2005, p. 711), and believes these retellings reveal a more holistic understanding of a text than either comprehension questions or short summaries can provide. Moss (2005) argues that frequent practice with expository text retellings can help students develop an understanding of how informational texts are organized and various pieces of information relate to each other within a text.

Making comprehension even more difficult, authentic, real-world informational texts rarely stick to one structure, but merge many structures together in one piece (Daniels, 2002; Hall-Kenyon, & Black, 2010; Ogle & Blachowicz, 2002). For a good example of this variation, think about a newspaper article about an earthquake. It may begin with a narrative from someone who experienced the event first hand, and then move into a summary of key events: what happened and when. Finally, it ends with a scientific explanation of how earthquakes occur with facts provided by a seismologist. Students need practice recognizing these structures and identifying what kind of information they contain. Research has demonstrated that those individuals who are able navigate the internal structures of texts recall more information and demonstrate higher levels of comprehension than those who cannot (Duke & Pearson, 2002; Hall-Kenyon & Black, 2010; Moss, 2005).

Navigating external text features such as the pictures, charts, graphs, glossaries, table of contents, text boxes, captions and so on is another skill students must possess in order to fully comprehend informational texts. These text features provide crucial, supplementary information to the main body of text and students must be able to extract the information contained in these features to

fully understand a text. Gear (2008) lists four purposes of external text features: to help the reader locate information, to organize information, to highlight important information, and to make information easier to access. She claims that many readers simply skip over these features unless they are explicitly taught how and when to use them. Narrative texts rarely use many of these text features, and this is a new skill required as students begin to use more and more informational texts. Students need teacher support with these complex features of informational text that make reading in the content areas difficult, however many “teachers are not prepared to address the challenges posed by the special demands of texts across the various disciplines” (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008, p. 53), as they are often not explicitly aware of these demands themselves.

The visual content of informational texts requires students to possess visual literacy skills in order to be able to read these texts effectively. Dean and Grierson (2005) highlight the importance of teaching visual text comprehension skills through the same gradual release of release of responsibility model (modeling, guided practice, independent practice) described previously in the theoretical framework section. These researchers acknowledge that visual reading strategies also need to be explicitly taught, and that students need to be able to activate prior knowledge, ask questions, create visualizations, make inferences and synthesize information while reading visual texts. Their study involved Grade 7 students in one classroom reading and writing combined-text picture books consisting of three separate components: illustrations, expository paragraphs and haiku poetry. Students’ visual literacy skills were developed through use of a picture walk and guided questions to promote critical thinking about visual texts. These researchers found that students’ engagement in their learning increased during this project and that students’ experiences reading and writing combined-text picture books “enabled students to take important steps in their development as strategic readers and writers” (Dean & Grierson, 2005, p. 467). While the strategies required for reading visual texts is an important factor to address, we must also look at the instructional practices of teachers who try to incorporate

visual literacy skills into their instruction. During a two-year project at a Canadian middle school, Begoray (2001) observed three teachers as they attempted to incorporate visual literacy practices into their teaching practice. The data collected in this study indicated that while these teachers used a variety of approaches to teaching visual literacy, viewing activities most often featured only the analysis of visual texts, and left out appreciation and criticism of visual texts despite the inclusion of these outcomes in curriculum documents. This finding is noteworthy, as it is important for our students to be able to recognize the significance of informational texts and critique the ideas they contain regardless of the mode the information is represented in. We must teach our students that visual texts must be assessed with attention to bias, truth and quality “just as it is accepted that not everything in print can be believed and that opinions vary” (Begoray, 2001, p. 216).

Finally, content area texts focus on subject matter that is often far removed from students’ life experiences. I have seen first-hand how a lack of background knowledge hinders even strong readers’ understanding of informational text. The DART (Brownlie, 2007) assessment is an informational text reading assessment given designed to be given to British Columbia students in September and April of every year to assess their reading comprehension and strategy use. However, one of the reading passages called *The Bowen Island Ferry* requires students have some knowledge about the ocean, ferries, and island living. While many students in British Columbia do possess this knowledge, many students in my northern school district do not. Many of them have not been to the ocean, let alone taken a ferry to any of the Gulf Islands, which makes it difficult to discern whether students do poorly on this particular assessment because they struggle with reading, or they lack the background knowledge required to understand the text. They might demonstrate a very different level of comprehension on an equally difficult text on a more familiar topic. Gallagher (2009) argues that “kids without prior knowledge are at a disadvantage, regardless of reading level” (p. 38). He describes an assignment he created called *Article of the Week*, which provided students with real-world texts to read and discuss.

An overview of articles used in his classroom from one year address topics such as global warming, world poverty, a proposed tax on junk food and airbrushed photography. The sole purpose of this assignment was for students to read a variety of interesting informational texts in order “to broaden [their] knowledge of the world” (Gallagher, 2009, p. 47). Further, Fang (2008) argues that the background knowledge needed to understand narrative texts is common sense developed through regular everyday social interactions such as making friends and dealing with conflict, while the background knowledge required to comprehend expository text is more specialized and is more-often developed through school based experiences. Many students may not have had successful school or life experiences with particular topics to have the necessary background knowledge to understand informational texts. As students progress through school, the informational texts they encounter become increasingly specialized within each subject area or discipline. The next section addresses disciplinary literacy and its connection to *Information Circles*.

### **Disciplinary literacy.**

Content area literacy is disciplinary in nature. Lee and Spratley (2010) argue that “each academic discipline or content area presupposes specific kinds of background knowledge about how to read texts in that area” (p. 2). Discipline specific strategies are often required to effectively read, write, speak, listen, view and represent discipline-specific texts, even though students are rarely taught what these strategies are (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Of particular concern to middle school teachers are the reading skills and strategies necessary for reading informational texts in mathematics, social studies and science. It is important to note that while these are not the only subject areas where subject-specific reading strategies are relevant, they are the subject areas most likely to be taught by a middle years’ generalist teacher.

In speaking to experts in the fields of history, chemistry and mathematics, Shanahan and Shanahan (2008) were able to shed some light on how different disciplines use effective strategies for

teaching students to read like these disciplinary experts. Their study involved two parts over two consecutive years. The first year involved the authors collaborating with experts in the fields of chemistry, mathematics and history to understand the specific reading skills and processes required of each discipline. For example, the chemists stressed the importance of the transformation of information or the relationship between text, pictures, diagrams, charts and so on. Historians stressed the ability to read with a critical eye aware of author bias, and mathematicians stressed the importance of the precise meaning of words in mathematical texts. The second year focused on creating discipline-specific strategies for teachers to use in their classrooms to help students develop literacy skills in each field. While each discipline advocated for use of similar strategies (e.g., structured summaries and structured notes), their application was different for each discipline.

One study that looked at discipline-specific strategy instruction is Fang et al.'s (2008b) study. As previously discussed, these researchers demonstrated that reading strategy infusion in middle years' science classes improved both student science literacy skills and science content knowledge. In this study, reading strategies were taught once a week and culminated with a review session where students were able to choose their favourite strategy and apply it to a science text. Students also participated in a science trade book home reading program and signed out related science trade books to take home and read every week. These interventions were particularly successful due to the amount of professional support science teachers received from reading specialists detailing how to teach the reading strategies effectively. Often content teachers are aware of the importance of teaching literacy skills, but unaware of exactly how to infuse reading into their classrooms. This study demonstrated the power that quality strategy instruction in content area classes can have on student achievement.

Finally, some Canadian research explored the integration of science literacy and language learning. The research by Anthony, Tippett & Yore (2010) recognized the importance of collaborative professional development in effecting change in the culture and teaching practice of science educators.

This study involved middle school science teachers at three different middle schools in British Columbia Canada. During the first year, teachers and researchers spent time analyzing new curriculum, textbooks and supplemental resources, while looking for opportunities to embed explicit literacy instruction. Results from biannual district assessments (DART and School Wide Write) were collected in order to identify the effects of instructional changes implemented by participating teachers but were not used as teachers were not yet ready to look at student annual gains on these assessments relative to their participation in literacy enriched and un-enriched science classrooms. Student comprehension of informational text was identified as an area where growth is needed in the participating schools. Preliminary results indicated that generalist teachers responded most positively to the professional development, but struggled to implement classroom activities to address the science literacy needs of their students. Finally, a case-study analysis where teachers implemented an informational brochure project combining print and visual literacy strategies indicated that students who participated in the brochure activity demonstrated positive gains in the fundamental sense of science literacy, which they then applied to learn a new science concept (derived sense of literacy) from new science brochure. While this study looked at several aspects of science literacy and embedded literacy instruction, it also demonstrated that a collaborative relationship between educators and researchers resulted in classroom practices that affect student achievement across both the fundamental and derived senses of science literacy.

The *Information Circles* resource is designed with these disciplinary literacy principles in mind. Although the *Information Circles* approach can easily be adapted for use in any subject area, it has been designed specifically for use in middle grades classrooms where teachers can easily integrate language arts instruction with science and social studies content area outcomes. The section that follows describes the disciplinary literacy skills required to effectively read science and social studies texts.

**Reading in science and social studies.**

Reading in social studies requires students to attend to texts with a critical eye to be aware of author and reader bias (Lee & Spratley, 2010; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Students must also be able to read both primary and secondary documents such as original letters, government documents, photographs and so on, so that they can read about historical events first hand, rather than through the eyes of a historian – in essence, students need to be able to read primary historical documents so that they can interpret and discuss the significance of these documents through their own lens. Primary documents also often include images and therefore, visual literacy is an important skill for reading in social studies. The historians consulted by Shanahan and Shanahan (2008) identified structured note-taking that identifies the who, what, where, when, why and how of historical events and requires students to link events together, as a useful reading strategy for social studies.

Reading in science requires that students have the literacy skills to deal with technical writing, dense sentences, abstract ideas and authoritative voice (Fang, 2008), in order to learn content from a text. Students know what to do when they come to new vocabulary words and they must have visual and mathematical literacy skills to deal with text features that include pictures, diagrams, charts and graphs (Lee & Spratley, 2010; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). While there is a lack of research specifically addressing the infusion of reading and science instruction in the middle grades (Fang et al., 2008), research has identified comprehension strategies that are particularly useful when applied to science-based texts. Fang et al. (2008b) found that when teachers infused explicit strategy instruction into their middle years' science classes, student science literacy and content knowledge improved. In this study, reading strategies were taught once a week and culminated with a review session where students were able to choose their favourite strategy and apply it to a science text. This intervention was particularly successful due to the amount of professional support science teachers received from reading specialists

detailing effective strategy instruction, as often content teachers are unaware of exactly how to infuse reading into their classrooms.

The above sections have addressed how best practices in adolescent literacy and notions of content area literacy informed the creation of the *Information Circles* resource. The final area of research that is addressed in the following section is research on the use of the literature circle structure in middle years' classrooms.

### **Literature Circles in Middle Years' Classrooms**

In short, Literature Circles is an instructional structure popular in intermediate classrooms that involves "literature discussion groups of four to six students who come together to read and discuss a shared piece of literature" (Maloch, 2002, p. 94). Proponents of literature circles claim that these small group discussions provide "egalitarian, student-centered spaces...that contrast with traditional teacher-led recitations" (Thein, Guise, & Sloan, 2011, p. 15) and that facilitates students' creation of personal interpretations of text meanings. The actual implementation of literature circles in classrooms is wide ranging; some are based on strict-role based participation and others are much more free-flowing discussions. Some variations of literature circles require teachers to facilitate these discussions and others are completely lead by the students themselves. But at the heart of each variation is students meeting together to discuss a commonly read text (Daniels, 2002b). Literature circles are intended to mirror adult book club discussions in an attempt to create authentic literacy instruction in an era of standardized testing and accountability (Daniels, 2002b). Student talk centered on texts is an important component of balanced literacy instruction (Allington, 2002a; Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Duke & Carlisle, 2010), and literature circles is one instructional structure that can facilitate the type of student talk about text described by the adolescent literacy documents already discussed. Ample empirical evidence supports literature circles as an effective structure for increasing literacy achievement. Harvey Daniels (2002b), who is often described as the father of literature circles, describes gains in academic

achievement in reading and writing across all grade levels after a school-wide implementation of literature circles. Klinger, Schumm, & Vaughn (1998) found that fourth-grade students who participated in peer-led discussion groups about social studies material showed greater gains in reading comprehension and content knowledge than control groups. Blum, Lipsett and Yocom (2002) found that literature circles improved middle school students with special needs' problem-solving and decision making skills. It is clear that literature circles are a valuable classroom strategy. Finally, Daniels (2006) claims that literature circles are a "powerful and durable" (p. 11) strategy because they promote student engagement, allow for student choice, encourage student responsibility and are based on and supported by empirical research.

While most scholarship on the topic of literature circles focuses on fiction and narrative texts, there is some discussion in the literature about the use of literature circles with nonfiction texts. Daniels (2002a; 2006) suggests that literature circles can be adapted for use with nonfiction and that this adaptation in an appropriate way to "infuse the curriculum with authentic, real-world nonfiction – the kind of informational – expository and persuasive texts that adults really read," (Daniels, 2002a, p. 10). He argues that textbooks are a poor choice for nonfiction literature circles because they "simply don't contain the kind of rich, compelling structured expository text" (2002a, p. 10) that we might find in the real world. However, there are arguments to be made that in some of our newer Canadian Science and Social Studies textbooks (e.g., Science Probe, British Columbia Science), one might find engaging vignettes about careers in science, First Nations knowledge or environmental issues that would work well for nonfiction literature circles. Further, Wilfong (2009) describes a successful implementation of nonfiction literature circles in a Grade 5 classroom using only science textbooks that resulted in improved student achievement on science unit tests. Regardless of whether textbooks can be used effectively or not, there is consensus that nonfiction literature circles should include a variety of texts from a variety of sources (Daniels, 2002a; Daniels, 2006; Stien & Beed, 2004; Wilfong, 2009).

Long and Gove (2003) demonstrated that literature circles can be effectively combined with what they dub “engagement strategies” to elicit deeper critical response and participation from students, especially when students are struggling to move toward a deeper understand of the text at hand beyond simple text-based retellings of text. I would argue that this engagement is an important goal for all literature discussion groups. Students in their study included 16 Grade four students from a poor urban area in the United States who demonstrated a wide range of reading abilities. Students were given the choice of three novels based on the same historical context and participated in literature discussion groups. As the students struggled to move beyond text-based retellings of the novels, the researchers used engagement strategies as a form of scaffolding to help invoke critical response. These strategies involved more direct teacher participation and encouraged students to read between the lines of the text to get at some of the deeper issues of social justice in these texts about racial segregation in the southern United States. These engagement strategies are not unlike the comprehension strategies described above that facilitate student comprehension of texts. Long & Gove found that “combining literature circles with engagement strategies is one way teachers can increase the likelihood that students will participate in conversations that move from literal, text-based response to critical response” (p. 359). This study demonstrated that sometimes students need explicit literacy instruction beyond their literature circle participation in order to facilitate a deep understanding of some texts.

It is important to consider the voices of middle years’ students when evaluating the effectiveness of literature circles in the classroom. Middle years’ students are can effectively voice their opinions and perceptions regarding their experiences which can affect the instructional choices teachers make when using literature circles. Evans (2002) investigated 22 fifth-grade students’ perceptions of their experiences with peer-based literature circles during a year-long study. In this study, Evans was involved as the researcher and a participant observer who regularly taught lessons, collaborated with

the classroom teacher and facilitated literature discussion groups. In this classroom, literature circles occurred twice a week. The teacher and researcher created discussion groups based on students' first and second choices from 8-10 teacher-selected novels. During each session, students spent 30 minutes reading and responding to their novels, met in peer-based discussion groups for 30 minutes, and then participated in a whole class debriefing about their literature discussions. Over the course of the year, students participated in two cycles of literature circles and the groups varied in gender composition throughout the year. Some groups were mixed gender, while others were not. Evans collected data through transcribed discussion groups and whole-class reflection sessions, as well as videotapes of discussion groups, field notes and student work samples. Several key themes emerged that characterized students' perceptions of literature circle discussion groups. First, the students were well-aware of the factors that made an effective discussion possible. Second, students said that the gender make-up of their group affected how they participated, and indicated that they participated better in same gender groupings. Finally, students conveyed that the presence of a bossy or controlling group member negatively affected their participation in literature discussion groups. This study demonstrated that students are aware of the factors that affect their full participation in literature circle discussions, and it provides teachers with some options as to where to focus instruction when teaching students how to be contributing group members in their literature circle groups.

As evident above, the literature circle model is not without limitations. Thein, Guise and Sloan (2011) cautioned teachers to be aware of the lack of challenge to personal responses that the literature circles strategy typically does not address, particularly with respect to the goals of critical multicultural pedagogy, and the need for students to experiment with alternative viewpoints and stances other than their own. In their study, Thein, Guise and Sloan conducted a close analysis of one literature discussion group in a Grade 10 classroom reading texts that addressed and critiqued class divisions and hierarchies in society. The students in this class represented a cross-section of the social classes present within the

school. The researchers transcribed literature circle discussions and their initial data analysis revealed “students in this group spent most of their time talking about the text, but also that their discussion aimed toward making real meaning of the characters and situations rather than simply summarizing or describing events in the text” (p. 18). When one considers the goals of literature circle discussion, this group appeared very successful. However, a second analysis revealed that students’ discussions often revolved around the theme of social class, and that student interpretations usually reinforced previously held stereotypes about social class that mirrored their personal experiences. These students missed out on some important critical interpretations of the text due to the focus of literature circle discussion on personal response. Then, Guise and Sloan (2011) do not devalue literature circles as a valuable instructional technique but call for “careful consideration and preparation if they are to be implemented in a manner that pushes students beyond the personal and toward the critical” (p. 23).

### **Summary**

The literature indicates that there are numerous theories, models and perspectives that support the structure and activities of the *Information Circles* resource. Constructivist theories of reading supports explicit comprehension instruction, sociocultural theory supports collaborative classroom talk about texts and a multiliteracies perspective supports the use of a wide range of texts including visual and multimedia representations. The literature review also addressed the importance and prevalence of informational texts in middle schools and several best practices for adolescent literacy instruction, along with principles of content area instruction and the need for its integration with literacy instruction. Finally, literature the supports the use of the literature circles structure and promoted students meeting in small groups to discuss common texts composed a crucial component of the literature review.

In chapter 3, I present the *Information Circles* resource which outlines curriculum connections, classroom organization and preparation, and provides detailed implementation procedures for text selection, text presentation, comprehension instruction and activities, group discussions and assessment considerations.

## Chapter 3

### Information Circles Resource Package

#### To The Middle Years' Teacher...

This resource package describes how you can implement the *Information Circles* approach in your own classroom whether you teach one group of students several subjects, or several groups of students one subject. The *Information Circles* resource is easily adapted across a wide variety of teaching contexts and with students who have diverse and wide-ranging learning needs; you decide on appropriate texts based on your students' needs and curriculum mandates. This package consists of several important components including an outline of initial considerations such as purpose, philosophy, connections to educational research and British Columbia prescribed learning outcomes as well as a brief resource overview and detailed implementation instructions that include teaching suggestions, sample lessons, strategy worksheets, and assessment black line masters. Finally, possible adaptations and ideas for differentiating instruction for all learners are addressed throughout this resource. I trust that you will find the ideas and strategies collected in this resource useful for incorporating informational text comprehension instruction into your middle years' classroom.

#### Initial Considerations

##### **Purpose.**

The purpose of this resource is to provide you, as a middle years' teacher, with a teaching resource that infuses strategy instruction with expository text reading and includes ample opportunity for students to read, respond to and discuss the informational texts they encounter. This resource is designed to be used in both integrated middle years' content area units or as a stand-alone unit in middle years' language arts classes. Interacting with expository texts is an important part of both these components of the middle years' curriculum. *Information Circles* consists of activities to be completed

before, during and after reading to help students to comprehend expository print-based and multimodal texts.

### **Information circles and adolescent learners.**

The following best practices of adolescent literacy instruction form the pedagogical foundations of *Information Circles*:

*Extended time for literacy.* Students move fluidly from one text to the next as they finish with one, they simply return it and select a new one. Quick readers do not need to wait for other students to finish, or for readers that need more time to try and rush to keep up. All students read at their own pace. This aspect facilitates maximum time spent with eyes on text or engaged in literacy activities as there is no time when any student can claim they are finished everything as reading and responding and discussing proceed in a continuous cycle.

*Explicit strategy instruction.* During each cycle, students receive explicit instruction on the use of one or more comprehension strategies that teach students to make connections, ask questions, make inferences, determine main ideas and supporting details, and synthesize ideas with and between the texts they are reading or have read. New strategies are introduced as students demonstrate competence with the previous strategies. Eventually, as student skill improves, students choose which strategies they would like to use and practice each week.

*Diverse texts.* Students choose from a wide range of different types of texts on various content area topics at a range of levels that have been strategically selected so that every student can find something that they are both able to and interested in reading. Text types may include articles, images, videos, informational trade books, websites or multimedia presentations.

*Choice.* Students choose (or teachers may assign or help students choose when necessary) which texts they will read, which response format they will use to record their reading, which comprehension strategy they will use, and which culminating activities they will complete for each cycle

of *Information Circles*. As time goes on and students become more proficient with using the responding and comprehension strategies, they will have more choice as to which activities they wish to complete for any given cycle.

*Student talk.* Students attend discussion groups with their peers and teachers for the opportunity to respond to and discuss the issues in the texts they have read. Students are expected to attend the discussion group for the text they are currently working with, but can join in for discussions on previously read texts if space allows. Students are encouraged to attend multiple group discussions and once again fluid movement between texts and groups is encouraged.

#### **From theory and research to practice.**

The following sampling of articles support the practices for reading and discussing expository texts as implemented in *Information Circles*:

Ogle, D., & Blachowicz, C. (2002). Beyond literature circles: Helping students comprehend informational texts. In C. Block & M. Pressley (Eds.), *Improving Comprehension Instruction: Rethinking Research, Theory, and Classroom Practice* (pp. 259-274). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

The authors argue that most of the texts we read as adults are informational in nature but most classroom reading instruction is literature based and that there is a significant lack of instructional support (including strategy instruction) for students reading content area/informational texts. They argue that proficient readers of informational texts are purposeful and actively engaged in reading activities, pay attention to external and internal text features and employ comprehension strategies to help them understand informational texts. They conclude by describing research-based instructional techniques that are useful for teaching students to be proficient readers of informational texts.

Swarton-McDonald, R., & Swiger, S. (2009). Developing higher order comprehension in the middle grades. In S. Israel & G. Duffy (Eds.), *Handbook of research on reading comprehension* (pp. 510-530). New York, NY: Routledge.

These authors discuss the issues with reading tasks in middle schools as students move from learning to read to reading to learn. They suggest that some of the difficulties students experience are due to the fact that comprehension strategy instruction receives much less attention in middle school classrooms than it actually deserves. Further, they list research supported classroom practices that support comprehension development in the middle grades including extensive opportunities for reading, available texts at an appropriate level of difficulty, connections to-out-of-school literacies, opportunities for discussion, choice and read alouds, most of which make up the theoretical underpinnings of the *Information Circles* resource discussed in Chapter 2.

Fang, Z., Lamme, L., Pringle, R., Patrick, J., Sanders, J., Zmach. C., Charbonnet, S., & Henkel, M. (2008).

Integrating reading into middle school science: What we did, found and learned. *International Journal of Science Education*, 30(15), 2067-2989.

doi: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09500690701644266>

In this study, the researchers (university-based literacy experts) worked with middle school science teachers to infuse reading strategy instruction and a science trade book home reading program into Grade Six science classrooms. Strategy instruction occurred once per week and students were given time to practice using a variety of comprehension strategies and could then choose which strategies they wanted to apply independently. The results showed an improvement in science literacy scores and school science test marks suggesting that the infusion of comprehension strategies with informational reading tasks is a practical way to address reading difficulties in content area classrooms.

Pitcher, S. M., Martinez, G., Dicembre, E. A., Fewster, D., & McCormick, M. K. (2010). The literacy needs of adolescents in their own words. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 53(8), 636-645.

doi:10.1598/JAAL.53.8.2

These researchers profiled seven struggling middle years' readers in an attempt to determine the type of instruction that would help them best grow as readers. The researchers assessed student

reading levels, interviewed students and parents, and studied the literacy programs in each student's respective school to create a literacy snapshot of each student. They found that reading comprehension was a concern for all students in the study, particularly with expository texts, and recommended explicit instruction of comprehension strategies, increased time for student self-selected reading, utilization of online resources and technology, and reading instruction in content area courses to improve literacy rates in middle schools. The *Information Circles* resource addresses the need for more instruction of comprehension of expository texts by providing students with opportunities to read engaging informational texts while practicing comprehension strategies activities.

#### **Curriculum Connections.**

*Information Circles* addresses numerous British Columbia Curriculum prescribed learning outcomes. The informational reading, comprehension and discussion components address learning outcomes from the English Language Arts (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2006a) IRP, specifically in the oral language and reading and viewing strands. Depending on the text choices each individual teacher makes, *Information Circles* also addresses key learning outcomes in the Science (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2005b), Social Studies (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2006d), and Mathematics (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2007) integrated resource packages. This flexibility makes *Information Circles* a valuable resource; the text choices of each teacher can be adapted to the needs of any middle grades' course or any student group with specific learning needs. The *Information Circles* resource package identifies relevant Grade 6 English Language Arts outcomes; however, the English Language Arts outcomes for Grades 5-8 are very similar, and the content of the texts chosen for students will dictate which content area learning outcomes will be addressed by *Information Circles* in classrooms. Teachers can easily adjust their text choices and comprehension activities to meet the specific needs of their students and their classroom content requirements. A

complete list of British Columbia PLO's for all grade levels and subject areas can be found at:

<http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/irp/welcome.php>.

### **Grade 6 English Language Arts outcomes (BC Ministry of Education, 2006a).**

The following tables outline the prescribed learning outcomes and suggested achievement indicators covered by the activities in *Information Circles*:

Table 1

#### *Oral Language Prescribed Learning Outcomes in Information Circles*

Oral Language Prescribed Learning Outcomes	
It is expected that students will...	Students fully meeting expectations will:
<p>A1 – use speaking and listening to interact with others for the purpose of</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contributing to group success</li> <li>• Discussing and comparing ideas and opinions</li> <li>• Improving and deepening comprehension</li> <li>• Discussing concerns and resolving problems</li> <li>• Completing a variety of tasks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Share ideas relevant to class activities and discussions</li> <li>• share ideas in structured discussions and dialogues to explore issues, varying viewpoints, and conflicts</li> <li>• ask questions to sustain and extend interactions</li> <li>• listen to classmates and others without interrupting, speak respectfully to others, and use language and tone appropriately when disagreeing</li> <li>• offer ideas and experiences that build on the ideas of others</li> </ul>
<p>A2 – use speaking to explore, express, and present a range of ideas, information, and feelings for different purposes and audiences, by</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• using prior knowledge and/or other sources of evidence</li> <li>• staying on topic in focused discussions</li> <li>• presenting in a clear, focused, organized, and effective manner</li> <li>• explaining and effectively supporting a viewpoint</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• present/discuss in their own words information that is accurate, states a topic, follows an organizational structure, and include specific and relevant examples and details</li> <li>• explain their own viewpoints and give reasons, and if applicable, support judgments through references to a text and prior knowledge, or other sources of evidence</li> <li>• emphasize key points with detailed evidence and media or visual aids, if applicable</li> <li>• use vocabulary appropriate to topic and audience (e.g., content specific words such as “global warming”)</li> <li>• use speaking to explore and refine their own ideas and opinions, and begin to respond to the ideas of others (e.g., “John said the artist used lots of green in the painting. I agree, and think it</li> </ul>

	is because...”)
<p>A3 – listen purposefully to understand and analyze ideas and information, by</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• summarizing and synthesizing</li> <li>• generating questions</li> <li>• visualizing and sharing</li> <li>• making inferences and drawing conclusions</li> <li>• interpreting the speaker’s verbal and nonverbal messages, purposes, and perspectives</li> <li>• analyzing</li> <li>• ignoring distractions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• identify and state a purpose for listening</li> <li>• summarize and synthesize facts and supporting details, and differentiate between main ideas and supporting details</li> <li>• ask questions to clarify or provide further understanding on the topic</li> <li>• identify an author or speaker’s viewpoint and purpose, and identify details that were provided to support the viewpoint</li> <li>• demonstrate attentive listening in nonverbal ways</li> <li>• attend to speaker without distracting or interrupting</li> <li>• respond appropriately to verbal and nonverbal cues</li> </ul>
<p>A4 – select and use strategies when interacting with others, including</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• accessing prior knowledge</li> <li>• making and sharing connections</li> <li>• asking questions for clarification and understanding</li> <li>• taking turns as speaker and listener</li> <li>• paraphrasing to clarify meaning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• refer to relevant texts they have read or heard, or contribute relevant experiences to the topic</li> <li>• connect and relate prior experiences, insights, and ideas to those of a speaker</li> <li>• make connections to personal and shared ideas and experiences by talking in pairs or small groups</li> <li>• ask thoughtful questions and respond to questions with appropriate elaboration</li> <li>• balance role of self as speaker and listener and follow the rules of conversation</li> <li>• explain and show understanding of other viewpoints</li> </ul>

Table 2

*Reading and Viewing Prescribed Learning Outcomes in Information Circles*

Oral Language Prescribed Learning Outcomes	
It is expected that students will..	Students fully meeting expectations will:
<p>B2 – read fluently and demonstrate comprehension of grade-appropriate information texts with some specialized language, including</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• non-fiction books</li> <li>• textbooks and other instructional materials</li> <li>• visual or graphic materials</li> <li>• reports and articles from magazines and journals</li> <li>• reference materials</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• read grade-appropriate information texts independently and collectively, with accuracy, comprehension, and fluency, including expression and phrasing</li> <li>• locate specific relevant details through the use of ‘text features’ (e.g., glossaries, tables of contents, unit summaries, indices, appendices, navigation bars, search engines)</li> <li>• identify main topics addressed in a selection</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• appropriate web sites</li> <li>• instructions and procedures</li> <li>• advertising and promotional materials</li> </ul>	<p>and distinguish between main ideas and related details</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• make organized notes on a topic by creating relevant categories that reflect the main ideas or topics</li> <li>• make inferences or interpretations based on evidence from the text</li> <li>• generate questions that may be answered through further reading on the topic</li> <li>• question the author’s viewpoint, position, or purpose (i.e., critical literacy)</li> <li>• develop skill in discriminating between fact and opinion</li> <li>• extract accurate and important information from text and ‘text features’, including specific details from graphics</li> </ul>
<p>B5 – select and use strategies before reading and viewing to develop understanding of text, including</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• setting a purpose and considering personal reading goals</li> <li>• accessing prior knowledge to make connections</li> <li>• making predictions</li> <li>• asking questions</li> <li>• previewing texts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• write down and/or share what they already know about a topic or idea</li> <li>• make logical predictions about content, based on prior knowledge and understanding of genre and author</li> <li>• generate a question(s) to guide reading and viewing</li> <li>• describe and use ‘text features’ (e.g., table of contents, illustrations, headings) to anticipate and ask questions about content</li> </ul>
<p>B6 – select and use strategies during reading and viewing to construct, monitor, and confirm meaning, including</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• predicting</li> <li>• making connections</li> <li>• visualizing</li> <li>• asking and answering questions</li> <li>• making inferences and drawing conclusions</li> <li>• using ‘text features’</li> <li>• self-monitoring and self-correcting</li> <li>• figuring out unknown words</li> <li>• reading selectively</li> <li>• determining the importance of ideas/events</li> <li>• summarizing and synthesizing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• make and confirm logical predictions</li> <li>• visualize, sketch, or use graphic organizers to support comprehension</li> <li>• figure out unfamiliar words or expressions, including specialized and technical vocabulary, by using context cues, word structure, illustrations, and classroom resources</li> <li>• self-monitor, select, and adjust strategies to self-correct (e.g., reread, read ahead, go to another source)</li> <li>• make connections during the reading (text-to-self, text to-text, text-to-world), comparing and contrasting characters, ideas, and events</li> <li>• question author’s motive or intent</li> <li>• use graphic and visual cues (e.g., bold type, headings, diagrams, sidebars) to clarify understanding</li> <li>• skim and scan to gather information</li> <li>• use glossaries, summaries, focus questions in text, outlines, sidebars, navigation bars, and</li> </ul>

<p>B7 – select and use strategies after reading and viewing to confirm and extend meaning, including</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• self-monitoring and self-correcting</li> <li>• generating and responding to questions</li> <li>• making inferences and drawing conclusions</li> <li>• reflecting and responding</li> <li>• visualizing</li> <li>• using ‘text features’ to locate information</li> <li>• using graphic organizers to record information</li> <li>• summarizing and synthesizing</li> </ul>	<p>hyperlinks to find information in non-fiction text</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• review the purpose set prior to reading or viewing and use it to guide rereading and “re-viewing”</li> <li>• use self-monitoring and self-correcting strategies</li> <li>• ask and respond to questions related to the material read or viewed</li> <li>• make inferences and draw conclusions</li> <li>• use ‘text features’ (e.g., headings, illustrations, diagrams) to locate and organize information</li> <li>• use graphic organizers to record and organize information</li> <li>• summarize the “big idea” or author’s message, and give supporting details</li> <li>• reflect on the reading and viewing and make connections (text-to-self, text-to-text, text-to-world)</li> </ul>
<p>B8 – respond to selections they read or view, by</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• expressing opinions and making judgments supported by explanations and evidence</li> <li>• explaining connections (text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world)</li> <li>• identifying personally meaningful selections, passages, and images</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• offer responses and opinions with supporting explanations</li> <li>• create a written response to text, making personal connections, connections to other texts, and connections to related events</li> <li>• compare their responses to texts with the response of others</li> <li>• make and support connections to other reading or viewing selections</li> <li>• identify powerful passages from texts and describe why they are personally meaningful</li> </ul>
<p>B9 – read and view to improve and extend thinking, by</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• analyzing texts and developing explanations</li> <li>• comparing various viewpoints</li> <li>• summarizing and synthesizing to create new ideas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• integrate new information and ideas from a selection into their own thinking and explain how it has changed their ideas about the topic</li> <li>• begin to identify contradictions and opposing viewpoints within ideas and information</li> <li>• draw a generalization from particular information presented in text</li> <li>• question the author’s purpose or viewpoint</li> </ul>

### **Cautions and concerns.**

A few cautions need to be considered before implementing *Information Circles* in classrooms.

First of all, while *Information Circles* are based on the idea of literature circles, there are some significant differences between them that must be taken into account. Literature Circles have been around for

many years and there are endless incarnations of them in classrooms across the world (Daniels, 2002b), so while students may have experience with peer-based literature discussions, they likely have experienced literature circles in different formats from one another. Please do not assume that students have the same understanding of literature circles as one another or even yourself do.

*Information Circles* are like literature circles in that they focus on peer-based discussions, but while literature circles usually focus on fiction novels, *Information Circles* focus on a broad range of informational texts including visual and multimodal texts. Thus, students may move through texts at a faster rate than during literature circles and you may need to find texts that take more than one class period for students to read. Also, as background knowledge affects a student's ability to comprehend informational texts (Ogle & Blachowicz, 2002), more whole class time may need to be spent addressing ideas, misconceptions or themes contained within a particular group of texts. However, the heart of literature circles and *Information Circles* remains closely linked: students meeting together in small groups to discuss texts.

Another caution to take into consideration when using this resource is to make sure that you do not release your students to work independently on comprehension strategies, response journals and culminating activities until they have had sufficient modeling and guided practice in order to complete the activities effectively. If your students are unfamiliar with the strategies in this resource, more time may need to be spent practicing them with the whole class before they have the skills to complete them on their own. In the same respect, be careful not to offer students too many activity choices before they are ready to do a good job on each activity.

Finally, regardless of how interesting and engaging the texts and activities you select for *Information Circles* are, there may always be students who try to get by doing as little work as possible without being noticed. You know who these students are. Look out for them. For *Information Circles* to be effective in your classroom, it is essential you stay organized and keep track of those students who

have completed required work, and those who have not. Use your existing classroom management techniques to encourage students who may not be motivated to participate to their fullest ability and to complete at least the minimum requirements for each cycle of *Information Circles*. The organizational black line masters included in Appendix A will help you keep track of student work and participation. Some students will need much more encouragement and redirection than others.

### ***Information Circles Overview***

*Information Circles* consists of three components: an introduction and preview lesson, an independent reading, response and discussion cycle that students move through at their own pace, and a culminating activity that synthesizes the main ideas between all the texts students have read in the cycle. Usually one cycle of *Information Circles* will take between 7 and 10 class sessions. Students will spend the first class working together as a class to access background knowledge on a common theme that all the texts focus on and during this time they are also introduced to the text selections. Lessons 2-6 consist of students reading their text selections at their own pace while completing reading response and comprehension activities and participating in peer-based discussion circles. This portion of the *Information Circles* activities is self-paced, so that students who need more time to read and respond can have the time they need, while quick finishers move on to the next text that they are interested in which may help to minimize off-task behaviour. The final 2-3 lessons consist of students working on a culminating activity designed to allow students to demonstrate their new knowledge on the common theme apparent in all the texts. After these 8-10 sessions, teachers can select a new theme and a new set of texts and start the process again if desired. The table below outlines the lesson progression for one cycle of *Information Circles*.

Table 3

*Information Circles Lesson Progression*

	<b>Lesson 1</b>	<b>Lessons 2-6</b>	<b>Lessons 7-9</b>
<b>Teacher Activities</b>	Introduce theme and learning outcomes  Deliver whole class lesson to access and address background knowledge of theme  Introduce text selections	Introduce and provide modeling and guided practice for comprehension/response activities  Facilitate discussion groups  Monitor participation and work completion	Introduce and provide instruction for culminating activity  Monitor participation and work completion  Assess student learning
<b>Student Activities</b>	Participate in whole class discussion/lesson  Complete independent activities that address background knowledge of theme  Select initial text to read	Read texts  Complete a comprehension/response activity for each text  Participate in discussion groups	Complete culminating activity  Complete self-assessment of learning

This format effectively builds differentiated instructional strategies into the structure itself, but does require a minimal amount of participation by each student in each cycle (7-10 sessions).

Differentiation occurs as all students are expected to read and work at their own pace; struggling readers can have more time to read and complete response and comprehension activities. This approach means that stronger readers might read more texts, read more difficult texts and complete more activities, but that the planning and organization is the same for all students. There also must be a range of reading levels of the text choices so that there is a text that matches the reading level of each student in the class. In terms of minimum participation, students should be expected to read at least three of the text choices, and complete a response activity for each as well as complete the culminating

activity. Many students will be able to complete much more than this minimum requirement, and will work to exceed the minimal expectations.

In short, students participating in *Information Circles* are expected to choose a text from a teacher-arranged set, read (or view) and respond to each text, complete (at least) one reading response or comprehension strategy activity per text, participate in (at least) one group discussion per week, and complete one culminating activity during each cycle based on a common theme or set of learning outcomes. I suggest that *Information Circles* run 3 times per week for 60-70 minutes each time, which gives students enough time to work through the readings and activities in class and provides enough time for you, the classroom teacher, to run two-three discussion groups per session. This method also allows for you to introduce a new comprehension/response activity each week so that as time goes on, students have more activities to choose from when they complete a text. Your students may already be familiar with some of these activities, but it is essential that they have sufficient instructional time and practice using these activities as a group before completing them independently. Students move in and out of groups fluidly depending on the text they are working on and as long as they are meeting minimal participation expectations. Thus, one cycle of *Information Circles* usually consists of all the reading, responding and discussing that occurs around one text-set – usually 8-10 class sessions. When the texts are replaced (and a new theme or new learning outcomes are selected), a new cycle begins. Alternatively, texts can be rotated out of the text set one at a time, as interested students finish with them. Students are held accountable for their participation in each cycle; you must be cognizant of which students need encouragement and support to complete the required elements. Below is a table outlining student and teacher activities during a typical week of *Information Circles* once students have selected and begun reading their texts:

Table 4

*Weekly Activities for Teachers and Students*

	<b>Monday (1 hour)</b>	<b>Wednesday (1 hour)</b>	<b>Friday (1 hour)</b>
<b>Teacher Talk</b>	Introduce new response/comprehension activity (25 minutes) Facilitate group discussions	Review response/comprehension activity (10 minutes) Facilitate group discussions	Facilitate group discussions
<b>Student Independent Activities</b>	Read/Respond Complete comprehension activity Prepare for discussion Participate in discussion	Read/Respond Complete comprehension activity Prepare for discussion Participate in discussion	Read/Respond Complete comprehension activity Prepare for discussion Participate in discussion
<b>Group Discussions</b>	1-2 meetings (15 min each)	2-3 group meetings (15 min each)	2-3 group meetings (15 min each)

**Organization.**

In my experience, organization has been a significant concern affecting the operation of literature circles in my classroom. Specifically, keeping track of who has what book, who has read what, who has completed (or not completed) which requirements, and who is participating well in discussion groups has been challenging. As is often the case with large class sizes, one or two students (or maybe more), desperately hope that the teacher will simply not notice their lack of participation or assignment completion. The following black line masters (BLM) are provided as organizational tools for *Information Circles* (or even Literature Circles) as an attempt to circumvent these issues. (See Appendix 1 for the complete set of black line masters).

*BLM #1: Text Completion Checklist.* Keep this sheet in your daybook or enlarge it and post in the classroom to keep track of which students have read which texts during each cycle of *Information Circles*. You can choose to record the information yourself, or have the students take ownership and record for themselves when they have completed reading each text in the set. You can also use this form to help keep track of which texts students have participated in discussion groups. Simply check off

the top half of the box when students have completed the text and the bottom half of the box after they have participated in the discussion group for that text.

*BLM #2: Assignment Checklist.* You can use this sheet to help you keep track of comprehension/response and culminating activity assignment completion in order to easily see which students have outstanding assignments, and which students are fully up to date and meeting expectations.

*BLM #3: Reading Record.* Students can keep this form in their workbooks to keep a record of the title of each text they read or view, the date they completed it, and a 1-2 sentence response to or summary of the text that will help them to remember what the text was about.

### **Classroom layout.**

One important organizational consideration of *Information Circles* is the layout of your classroom. While it may be difficult to have the optimal setup for *Information Circles* due to the physical limitations of your classroom, take time to consider the following suggestions:

**Discussion centre.** You need somewhere where you can meet with groups to carry out the discussion circles. Ideally, these discussions occur at a table that all group members fit around comfortably, and are slightly removed from the rest of the students to minimize distractions.

**Quiet work area.** Students who are not engaged in a discussion group will need to have a place to work quietly on reading, responding to texts and preparing for discussions without interrupting the rest of the class. One of the best arrangements for this aspect may be to have student desks in rows, or in partners to minimize the opportunity for off-task behaviour.

**Text selection centre.** You need somewhere to lay out all the texts in an organized fashion so that students can easily find what they are looking for and will return their texts to the correct location. One suggestion is to have a basket/bin for each separate text so that you do not end up with piles of

paper mixed together on a side shelf. If you are using multimedia, video or large visual images, those will each need a specified location in your classroom as well.

**Assignment Centre.** You need a location where students retrieve and hand in their required assignments. Numerous black line masters accompany this resource and once you select which ones you would like to use, you need to have copies available for students to access as they need them. One suggestion is to have the black line masters photocopied and stored in clearly identified manila envelopes hanging on a bulletin board so that they remain organized. Students also need a location where they will hand in their responses and comprehension activities.

### **Detailed Implementation Procedures**

This section provides detailed explanations on how to create text sets, introduce and help students select texts, conduct the initial theme preview lesson, introduce and teach response/comprehension activities and culminating activities, prepare for and run group discussions, and assess student learning.

#### **Text selection and assignments.**

Text selection is one of the most important decisions you will make in planning the *Information Circles* unit. Poorly selected texts that are uninteresting or too difficult for students will not result in dynamic peer-based discussions as students may have little to say about these texts. Texts that are uninteresting will not compel students to work through more texts than the bare minimum. Texts used for *Information Circles* must engage students in the content they are expected to discuss and form opinions on. The goal is that for each text cycle, there will be at least one text that will appeal to each student in the class and that low to high level reading abilities are accounted for in the selections. Typically, the most competent readers will read most or all of the choices, and less able readers can be confident that there will always be a text that they can comfortably read and work with independently. As their skills and confidence improve, students may begin to feel comfortable selecting more difficult

texts. However, achieving these outcomes will require strategic text selection by you, the teacher. You will also need to be aware of which texts your students are selecting and monitor and encourage students to make appropriate reading selections for themselves as not all middle years' students can do this selecting effectively. The types and content of texts used for *Information Circles* is up to you to decide on based on your unit along with the reading levels and interests of your students. For example, if you are interested in improving students' use of external text features, you may select articles that include good examples of these features such as graphs, text boxes and images with captions. If you are interested in having students discuss controversial science topics such as cloning or climate change you may select articles on these topics that encourage students to form strong opinions. Or, you might be interested in having your *Information Circles* unit revolve around content area learning outcomes such as Canadian identity and culture, and select texts that explore Canadian signs/symbols, history and immigration and select materials accordingly. Finally, you might simply select a group of texts based on the common interests of students in a class such as sports or animals and focus on the processes of reading, responding and discussing. *Information Circles* can be customized to a wide range of reading needs at the discretion of the teacher. The table below includes a list of topic selections that would be appropriate for use with middle years' students and correlate with BC prescribed learning outcomes.

Table 5

*Content Area Topic Suggestions for Text Selection*

<b><i>Information Circles</i> Topic Suggestions Based on British Columbia Curriculum for Grades 6-8</b>		
<b>Social Studies</b> (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2006d, 2007)	<b>Science</b> (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1997, 2005b)	<b>Health and Career Education</b> (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2005a, 2006b)
Canada and the World: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Canadian identity/cultural influences/cultural differences</li> <li>• government systems</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• scientific Method</li> <li>• scientific Problem Solving</li> <li>• what scientists do</li> <li>• ethical Behaviour</li> <li>• science and technology</li> </ul>	Healthy Living: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• physical, emotional, social health</li> <li>• nutrition and exercise</li> <li>• media influences</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• justice and equality</li> <li>• rights and responsibilities</li> <li>• role of Canada in the world</li> <li>• communication technologies</li> <li>• economic relationships</li> <li>• environmental relationships</li> </ul> <p>Ancient Civilizations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• civilization and social roles</li> <li>• influences on present day</li> <li>• rules, laws and governance</li> <li>• technology and exchange</li> <li>• environmental relationships</li> </ul> <p>World Civilizations (500-1600):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• development and decline</li> <li>• cultural achievements</li> <li>• Medieval/Renaissance societies</li> <li>• daily life, art, religion</li> <li>• power and authority</li> <li>• legal systems and governance</li> <li>• rights and responsibilities</li> <li>• contact and conflict</li> <li>• early economic systems</li> <li>• trade and commerce</li> <li>• science and technology</li> <li>• world geography/exploration</li> <li>• settlement/populations</li> <li>• resource Use</li> <li>• environmental Relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• diversity of Life</li> <li>• cells and systems</li> <li>• ecosystems</li> <li>• electricity</li> <li>• chemistry</li> <li>• optics</li> <li>• fluids and dynamics</li> <li>• exploring extreme environments</li> <li>• Earth's crust</li> <li>• water systems on Earth</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• human reproduction</li> <li>• developmental differences</li> <li>• communicable diseases</li> <li>• healthy decision making</li> <li>• healthy goal setting</li> </ul> <p>Healthy Relationships:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• peer influences</li> <li>• media influences</li> <li>• stereotyping, discrimination, bullying</li> </ul> <p>Safety/Injury Prevention:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet safety</li> <li>• Work-related hazards</li> <li>• Road/bicycle safety</li> <li>• Sources of help</li> </ul> <p>Substance Misuse Prevention:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prevention</li> <li>• Alternatives</li> <li>• Consequences</li> <li>• Media/social influences</li> </ul>
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A few technical details need to be considered when selecting and organizing your text sets.

First, make sure you have 5-6 copies of each text available for student selection. If most of your texts are photocopied articles it may be useful to photocopy them on coloured paper so that you and your students can easily distinguish one text from the next to aid with organization. Some students may find it useful to take notes on, highlight or otherwise mark up their texts as they read. This useful strategy is one that mature readers often use, and if you encourage the latter, be aware that you will need to replenish your text supply as students move through each group. In order to keep groups at an effective

size for discussion, you want only 5-6 copies of each text in use at any given time. Also, make sure you consider the length of the texts you select for your students. If you choose 5-6 short one-page news article type texts, students may move through the texts too quickly to allow for fluid movement between texts and groups. Try to pick some easier shorter texts that will appeal to less able readers, but also include interesting texts that are several pages long with more detailed information at a higher reading level so that highly skilled readers can expect a challenge as well. Be creative when selecting texts and do not forget to expand beyond print-based texts. Select an informational DVD and set up a station where students can watch and respond to the information in the DVD. Most school/district libraries have numerous DVD's that are engaging and connect to curriculum. Students will appreciate a variety of text types to choose from. Informational trade books make great choices for *Information Circles*, and there are many high quality trade books available. However, as multiple copies of the book are required, it may take some time/resources to build a collection of books to use for *Information Circles*.

Finally, it is essential that you have read each and every text before trying to facilitate discussion groups. It will be obvious to students if you have not read the texts and it will be much more difficult to keep discussion on track and directed towards key issues in the texts. Read the texts. Make notes of interesting points, confusing information or controversial issues that students may be interested in discussing. Remember, students will learn from watching and listening to you, so be a model of what a good reader does. Show your students how you take notes, make marks in the margins, or re-read confusing sections. Many of your students will need these strategies explained, discussed and modeled before being able to use them effectively.

#### **Where to find texts.**

Building a text collection for *Information Circles* may seem daunting in an era of funding cutbacks and limited resources, but there are many places to find informational texts for free or very

little money. Remember you only need six copies of each text and articles and many print resources can be photocopied. Many schools have funds to purchase books for literature circles, so you may be able to purchase texts from the same funds. In the past, I have been able to solicit funds from *Parent Advisory Councils* and *Raise a Reader Grants*. Student *Scholastic* book orders also provide teachers with free picks and bonus coupons to spend on more books from the classroom. District Resource Centres, school and public libraries also often have collections of books to borrow. Finally, the internet has plenty of great informational texts for students if you know where to look (see below).

Daniels (2002a) suggests that in order for nonfiction literature circles to be effective, students need texts that are “discussable” (p. 11). He describes discussable texts as texts that include some of the following characteristics. Look for these characteristics when selecting texts:

- Content that is important or engaging
- People we can care about
- A narrative structure or chronological timeline
- Places we can visualize
- Danger, conflicts, risks, or choices
- Value, moral ethical, or political dimensions
- Some ideas that reasonable people can debate, dispute or disagree about (pp. 7-14)

Since text selection is crucial to the success of *Information Circles*, I have included a list of locations to find interesting texts on a variety of topics. This list is by no means exhaustive, but simply a place to start to look for interesting, high quality texts for students. These sources include a range of reading levels, with most falling in the Grade 5-8 range. A few of the sources (i.e. Nova) include more difficult texts for your most advanced readers. These text sources also include a range of visual and multimedia features in order to extend reading beyond print-only based texts.

- Nova: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/> Produced by PBS – a collection of articles, videos, television programs, and multimedia resources on a variety of topics including ancient worlds, life and environmental science, technology and space
- Science times: <http://sciencetimes.ca/> Created and edited at SFU, Science Times is a collection of online news resources that provides up-to-date information on science stories on science, technology and environmental topics. Each article is produced at three different reading levels.
- Gallagher's *Article of the Week*: [http://www.kellygallagher.org/resources/articles\\_archive.html](http://www.kellygallagher.org/resources/articles_archive.html) Kelly Gallagher shares his resources for his article of the week assignment that he uses as an attempt to increase students' background knowledge of current events issues.
- DOGOnews: <http://www.dogonews.com/> An online newspaper for children with topics ranging from current events to entertainment to social studies. New articles include interesting stories, images and information from around the world.
- Weekly Reader News for Kids: <http://www.weeklyreader.com/subcategory/74> News stories for kids often about current events. A subscription service is also available for a variety of weekly informational texts.
- National Geographic: <http://www.nationalgeographic.com> Free articles, quality photos, videos, maps, news stories, feature stories about a variety of topics including animals, the environment, culture, and history. Also has a children's site with information at lower reading levels.
- Information Trade Books: Adrienne Gear's *Nonfiction Reading Powers* (2008) has several lists of nonfiction trade book titles organized by topic and grade level that provide quality information and lead students to think more deeply about the topics/issues at hand.
- What in the World/Canadian Reader – These are monthly subscription services that schools or districts must purchase, but each month's release includes at least four current events articles, along with comprehension activities, online extension ideas and activities to get students

thinking about recent national/International events. See

<http://www.lesplan.com/en/publication/what-world-le-monde-en-marche-level-1>

- Textbooks – Many new textbooks have ‘extra features’ that students too often skip over as non-important or extraneous information, but would make interesting texts for Information Circles. For example, a textbook may include a two-page spread discussing what a career as an astronaut entails in its chapter on exploring extreme environments.

### **Sample text sets.**

The following list of texts is a sample text set for an *Information Circles* unit on Ancient Greece.

This text set includes an online video, and informational trade book in chapter format, an informational book with several sections/articles to be read separately, and an informational picture book. This text set is appropriate for one round of *Information Circles*, or 3-6 weeks.

Deary, T. (2007). *Horrible Histories: Groovy Greeks*. Toronto, ON: Scholastic Canada Ltd.

This is an informational book divided into sections that would lend themselves to being read as several separate articles in *Information Circles*. Each section provided information about life in Ancient Greece using a variety of text features including text, maps, timelines, flowcharts, comics and so on. Section titles include “Fight like a Greek,” “Groovy Greek Growing Up,” and “The Gruesome Gods,” and are written in language easily accessible and engaging to middle years’ students.

Evans, C. (2001). *Usborne Illustrated Guide to Greek Myths & Legends*. Toronto, ON: Scholastic Canada Ltd.

This informational picture book contains an illustrated guide to a wide variety of Greek Gods and the legends surrounding each of them. It is printed on glossy pages in an engaging, easy-to-read format and includes a wide variety of text features for students to navigate in order to obtain information. Sections of this book could be used as texts for *Information Circles* or the entire book could

be used for students who require a challenge as it contains information about a significant number of Greek Gods.

PBS Nova. (2008 January 8). *Secrets of the Parthenon*. Retrieved from

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/ancient/secrets-parthenon.html>

This video explores the architecture of the Parthenon in Greece and follows a group of architects who have been working for 30 years to restore the Parthenon before it collapses. The ancient Greeks originally built the Parthenon in eight years, yet modern technology is still struggling to save it. This video provides exclusive access and footage of this 2500 year old structure and engaging commentary.

Wilhelm, D. (2010). *A Wicked History: Alexander the Great, Master of the Ancient World*. Toronto, ON: Scholastic Canada Ltd.

This trade book provides a detailed history of the life and exploits of Alexander the Great in an easy-to-read, motivating format complete with maps, timelines, pictures, and text. It is broken up into three chapters and outlines Alexander the Great's exploration and conquest of the ancient world.

### **Theme preview lesson.**

After you have selected your topic/theme and texts, you need one lesson to introduce them to your students. The first part of this lesson consists of familiarizing your students with the theme and identifying their background knowledge, opinions and even misconceptions about the topic. Conley (2008) describes an introductory lesson on pollution using a graphic organizer to "support students' inquiry and cross-text comparisons" (p. 89). In Conley's (2008) example, students are required to read a variety of texts (including magazine articles, political speeches, position papers and science research reports) to "develop an informed critical stance about pollution" (p. 89), and he uses a graphic organizer to help students organize their thinking and ideas about the concept of pollution.

Whatever topic you select, begin the lesson by introducing the topic and asking students to share their knowledge and experience with the topic (i.e. pollution). Next, introduce the graphic organizer; a simple web for student's to record information on (Figure 1). As with all strategy instruction, be explicit when instructing students how to use the graphic organizer. Students need to know why and how to record their thinking in the web and they need you to model how to record their thinking, especially if they are unfamiliar with the form. Take time to explain why you are separating ideas on the web and model your own thinking before asking students to contribute. Once you have introduced the topic, and put your own ideas on the graphic organizer, ask students to share what they know and where they would place it on the web. As the class begins to complete the web, ask clarification questions, or make suggestions as to where an idea may fit. Next, ask students to turn and talk to their neighbor to identify another idea that may fit on the web that has not already been discussed. Partners can create a mini version of the web in their notes and then share it with the class after they have had some time to work on it together. Be sure to ask students to justify their thinking and give reasons for their suggestions. Make changes to the web as students provide new information in order to model that learning new information sometimes means that we have to go back and revise previous ideas. If students are largely unfamiliar with a topic, and do not have a lot of background knowledge to add to the graphic organizer, it may be beneficial to have them read or view and discuss a text together as a class before presenting the individual text selections.

***Sample dialogue.***

The following is a sample dialogue you can use to introduce your topic and graphic organizer during the theme preview lesson:

Today we are going to start a new unit on pollution. Does anyone think they already know at least one thing about pollution? Does anyone think they know at least five things about pollution? Turn to your neighbor and share one thing that you know about pollution. Over the next three weeks

we are going to read and discuss what we learn about pollution, but first it is important that we think about and organize what we already know about pollution, because it sounds like a lot of people already know a lot about pollution. “Graphic organizers are a way of picturing what you know. You can make a graphic organizer to think about what you already know and to use when you are learning something new. You can add more as you learn more, and you can change what you think,” (Conley, 2008, p. 90). Let’s look at the web on the overhead (chalkboard, smart board and so on). We have the main topic at the top. Does anyone know any different types of pollution? (e.g., air pollution, water pollution, ground contamination, and so on). I am going to list the different types of pollution we already know in their own spaces so that I can keep our ideas organized. I already know a few things about air pollution because there has been a lot of news stories lately about the bad air quality in downtown Prince George and lots of people who live downtown are concerned about air pollution from industry. I know from the news that the pulp mills, the CN rail yard, and car emissions are the biggest contributors to poor air quality in Prince George so I am going to record those here. Does anyone else know anything about air quality? I will add your ideas as well... This dialogue can continue on back and forth with you modeling good use of the graphic organizer while students share their thinking and knowledge. Figure 1 shows an example of a filled in graphic organizer on the topic of pollution which fits into both the middle years’ science and social studies curriculums.

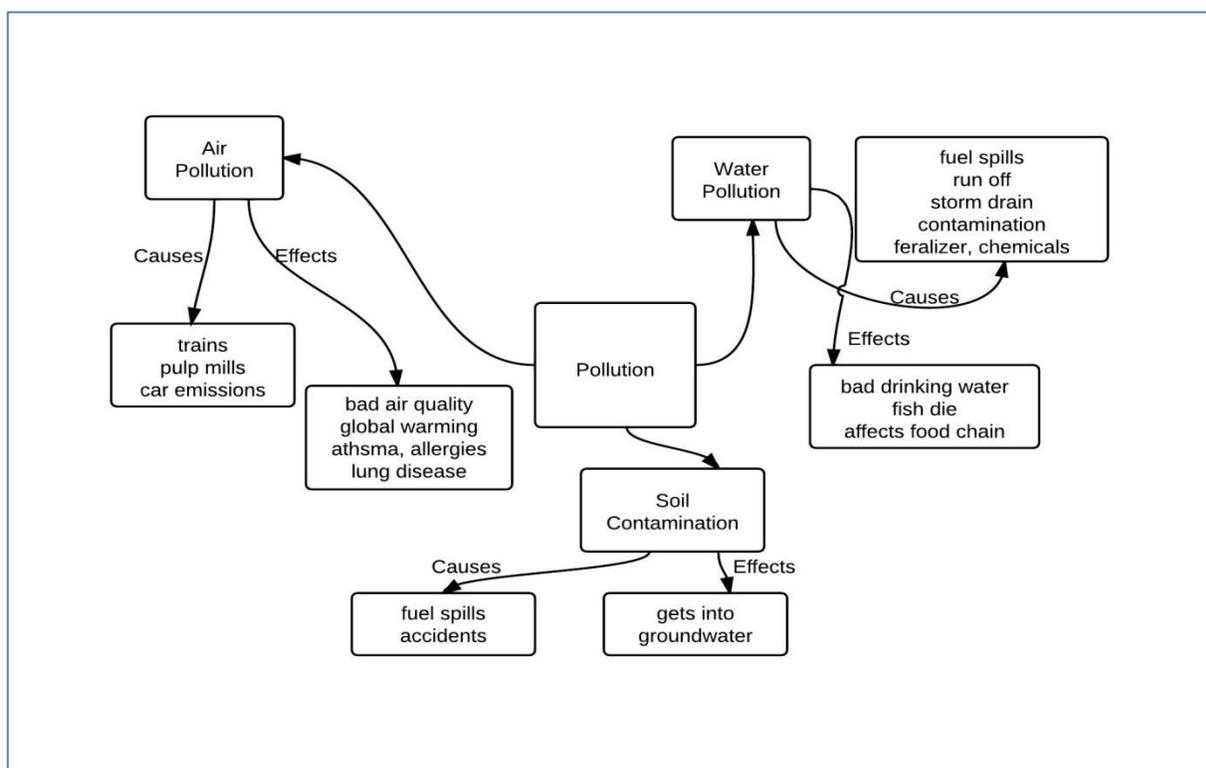


Figure 1. A completed graphic organizer on the topic of pollution showing an example of the type of student work expected during the theme preview lesson.

### Presenting the texts.

After the theme preview lesson has been conducted, and you are confident your students have some background knowledge about the topic, it is time to present the text choices to your students. This important step requires enthusiasm for all the texts, and clever 'marketing' by you so that students make appropriate choices about what they would like to (and are able to) read. When presenting a new set of texts to students, you want every student to be excited about every text choice, as the goal is to have students read and discuss many texts. However, wise text choices by students are crucial in order for *Information Circles* to be a successful positive experience. The following is a list of suggestions for presenting *Information Circles* texts that has been adapted from Brownlie's (2005, p. 12) list for presenting fiction novels for literature circles:

- Be enthusiastic about every text

- Give a short summary of each text without giving away key details – what is it about and why would anyone be interested in reading it
- Share an interesting or thought provoking quote from the text to pique students' interest
- Comment on difficulty in a respectful way – page count, size of text, amount of white space, number and type of text features
- Remind students that if they do not get their first choice right away, they will have a chance to read it as group membership is fluid and always changing
- Remind students that because everyone reads at a different rate, choosing a text based on what their friend chooses is not beneficial as you may move on to a new text before your friend is ready
  - Ask students to think of a first and second choice in case their first choice is not immediately available

It is important that students pick texts that are appropriate for their reading level as well as being texts that they find interesting. Generally speaking, students do not want to be assigned to the 'easiest' text because they are a weak reader; however, if you encourage them to choose a text that meets their needs and interests as readers, they may make that choice on their own, or they may not. Teach your students how to find their just right text. Ask your students to look over a whole text, reading the captions, headings, photos and so on before selecting it in order to determine if it is a good fit for them. Have students read the first 3-4 paragraphs and if there are more than four words they have trouble reading then the text is too hard and they should try to select something else. Sometimes students need a concrete strategy to use in order to assess if a text is just right or not.

Sometimes, as the teacher you will need to gently step in and make helpful suggestions about text choices. A few guiding questions, and maybe a discrete gentle suggestion may sway a student's

selection to a more appropriate choice. Or, simply remind all students that if they choose a text that they immediately find is not a good fit, that they can change texts to one they think might be better. Middle school students do not want to be singled out, but they are able to make good choices when they are given the appropriate framework to make choices within. I like to let students pick their own texts, and move in and out of groups as they are ready, but there will always be students who need more guidance or even firm reminders of the *Information Circles* expectations. Step in to help/encourage/reinforce/ refocus where necessary, and step back out when you feel students can effectively control their own learning and make appropriate choices for themselves. For example, if you notice a student is having trouble selecting a text, pick up a text that you feel would be appropriate and say “Kris, this text made me think of you when I was reading it because it talks about the effects of soil contamination on wild game,” or “Kylee, maybe you should try this text because I know you like animals and it talks about ways that we can help animals in the Arctic.” These types of gentle suggestions can help point students in the right direction by focusing on their personalities and interests rather than their reading abilities.

#### **Reading record and comprehension activities.**

It is important for students to be active readers, metacognitively aware of what is happening in their head as they read new information. Active readers are continuously making connections, asking questions, making inferences, and monitoring their understanding (Duke & Pearson, 2002; Keene & Zimmerman, 2007; Swarton-MacDonald & Swiger, 2008), however, it can be hard to capture and keep a record of this thinking. Reading record and response can help students keep track of their thoughts and organize and consolidate their ideas on paper. Brownlie (2005) claims that for students “the act of writing helps deepen their thinking and their understanding – helps them to become more reflective readers” (p. 24), which is what we want to encourage our students to become through their participation in *Information Circles*. As we want to know what our students are thinking about while

they read, I have adapted three response formats to use for students to record their thinking as they move through a text (see BLM's 4-7 in Appendix 1). You need to determine which format you want your students to use. You may find that you start with one, and then add the others in as choices for students as they become skilled with each one. You may also find that a particular text lends itself to one response format better than another. Ultimately, it is just important that students are responding to what they read to help them keep track of their ideas and describe their strategy use before they move on to a discussion group.

I suggest requiring students to complete a response for each text they read, but to hand in only one response (of their choice) per week. The goals of *Information Circles* are to have students reading, responding to and discussing numerous informational texts. However, there is a very real concern that students may get bogged down in paperwork and assignments (and you with marking) and then have less time to simply engage with text or participate in discussions. The response assignments are designed to keep students on track, record their thinking, and demonstrate their ability to focus on the ideas/issues in a given text. It is up to you to find the balance between reading with a focus and paperwork. Some students/classes will be capable of more, others less.

The three formats I suggest for *Information Circles* reading response are: double-entry journals, 6-square thinking sheets and important information records. Depending on whether or not students are able to mark up/make notes on the texts (photocopied articles vs. text/trade books), students may need tools for marking notable points in the text. These notable points may be a piece of interesting information, an idea they do not understand, an issue they have a strong opinion on, a place where they made a connection, and so on. Providing students with sticky notes to stick into the text and make a quick note on may be a useful way for the students to hold on to their thinking without losing it. Then when it becomes time to write their response, students can simply take a look at their sticky notes and begin from there.

It is critical that response formats are modeled and practiced together following a gradual release of responsibility approach (Duke & Pearson, 2002; Pearson & Gallagher, 1983) before students are expected to complete them on their own. Students may already be familiar with some of these response formats as they are commonly used for responding to literature in classrooms. Ask them and then scaffold their learning. This scaffolding requires you to lead the reading of a text and filling out several response forms together before the *Information Circles* unit begins. Next, students read on their own, but you still lead in the completion of the forms. Finally, students do both reading and responding independently. In my experience, students who have had time to practice response formats with ample feedback are much more successful at completing response formats that meet expectations on their own later on.

There are several options for when the explicit instruction and guided practice phases can occur. You could choose to teach and integrate the strategies into reading activities throughout the year so that students are already familiar with them before beginning the *Information Circles* unit. As students will already be familiar with the strategies, students will need only brief refreshers on the purpose and execution of the activities and more time can be devoted to discussion groups. Alternatively, you can build the explicit instruction component into your weekly schedule for *Information Circles* and spend time once a week introducing, teaching and practicing the strategies before students break into their discussion groups or go to work independently reading and responding to their respective texts. Each week, you would select one activity to introduce and practice with students. Depending on the needs of your students, you may choose to focus on one activity for several weeks, introduce a new activity every week, or give students a range of choices in any given week to select to complete. As students become more competent using the activities, you can provide them with more choices for comprehension activities.

***Double entry journal (adapted from: Brownlie, 2005; Gear, 2006; Tovani, 2004).***

Double-entry journal responses have existed in various forms for quite some time. They are an excellent method for students to respond to what they have read in a fairly open-ended format. This format does take some practice and requires constructive feedback from the teacher, but when middle years' students have experienced double-entry journals through teacher modeling and guided practice they are quite capable of replicating the form to explain their own thinking about a wide range of texts. Basically, students divide their paper into two halves: one side is titled 'quote' or 'main idea,' and the other is titled 'my thinking.' Students select a quote, passage or main idea from the text and record it on the left hand side of their page along with the text title and relevant page number. On the right side of the page students respond to the selection explaining why they selected the quote, their connections, questions, inferences, thought and opinions on the selection.

Quote OR Main Idea: (include text title/page number)	My Thinking: (connections, questions, inferences, thoughts, opinions)
1.	
2.	
3.	

*Figure 3.* Outline for a basic double-entry journal. Students can complete on a black line master or copy on into a notebook.

As previously mentioned, the format is very open-ended which may result in weaker students veering off in an irrelevant direction, but it allows for students to really think through a piece of text and explain their thoughts without the confines of excessive prompts or rigid expectations. You may need to add more concrete requirements, such as selecting the quote or identifying the main idea for students

who struggle with this open-ended format. Or you may need to specify the type of response a particular student must make to a quote by requiring a connection, a question and an opinion. To encourage students to write lengthier responses, you may also require them to include more than one quote or main idea on the left hand side of the page, especially if they run out of things to say about the first quote selected. In my experience, responding to a quote has been much more difficult for my students than responding to a main idea; this variation could be a means of differentiation for your very capable students – have these students respond to quotes, while others respond to main ideas or short summaries. (See appendix A for black line masters 4 and 5.)

***Six-square thinking chart (adapted from Gear, 2010).***

Six-square thinking charts are a more structured form of the double-entry journals described above. They require students to record similar aspects of their thinking (connections, questions, inferences), but require students to respond to all of the aspects rather than pick and choose what they want to talk about. This procedure can be either positive or negative depending on your students. It may be a good response format if your students struggle with open-ended response formats or if your teaching style prefers more structured formats. Middle years' students should be expected to write several sentences in each of the boxes to fully meet expectations, and not simply a few words.

<b>Summary:</b> Give a brief explanation of what the text is about...	<b>Knew/New:</b> Something you already knew and one new thing you learned from this text...
<b>Questions:</b> What are you still wondering about?	<b>Inferences:</b> What are some possible answers to your questions?
<b>Visualization:</b> Draw and label a picture that shows one thing you learned from the text	<b>Connections:</b> This reminds me of...

*Figure 3.* Outline for a six-square thinking chart. Students are required to record their thinking in each of the six boxes.

As always, it is important to consider students who may need differentiation due to unique learning needs and the latter is easily done with the six-square thinking chart. You may offer some students the choice to fill out 3/6 of the boxes, or assign particular boxes for particular students. Also, increasing or decreasing the length of expected response in each box is an easy way to differentiate this response format for different learning needs. The six-square thinking chart is an easy tool for students to use to capture their thinking while interacting with texts it and gets students used to recording their thinking on paper. (See appendix A for black line master 6).

***Important information records (adapted from Close, 2005).***

Important information records are a third response format that you can use to have your students respond to the texts they read during an *Information Circles* unit. Important information records fall somewhere in between the open-ended double-entry journal format and more structured six-square thinking charts, but still require students to participate in similar thinking tasks (making connections, asking questions, making inferences, forming/explaining opinions and accessing background knowledge). Students have more choice in how they respond to important information they identify in the text but still must identify why information is important. In my experience, students often struggle to explain why they think something is important and this response format requires them to think of the why with every idea they select. Students are expected to select several important ideas from the text and respond to each of them separately in several sentences. (See appendix A for black line master 7.)

What I already knew...		What I learned that's new...
What's Important? 1.  2.  3.	Why?	Connections, Questions, Comments...

*Figure 4.* Outline for a basic Important Information record. Students pick out important information from the text to respond to.

Once again, this response format is easy to modify or adapt for use in different learning contexts or for use with students with unique learning needs. It is easy to modify the number of important points you require particular students to complete, and if the third box is too open-ended for some students, you can provide more explicit expectations for how you would like your students to respond. Further, students could respond in one of the sections with images/diagrams rather than sentences if you feel that would be beneficial.

Each of the three response formats described in this section has numerous opportunities for modification in order to suit specific classroom and learning needs, and they all require similar thinking and comprehension strategy use from students. It is important to remember that differentiation may require changing the response expectations for particular students rather than simply requiring shorter or longer responses. Ultimately, it is up to you, the teacher to decide which format will work best for your students and how often students will be required to submit completed responses for assessment.

#### **General lesson outline.**

Use the lesson outline below, which is based on the gradual release of responsibility model, to introduce and teach your students to use the reading response activities described above. This model

uses teaching the double entry journal as an example, but can be adapted for all the response forms and the comprehension activities included in this resource.

### ***Introduction.***

Remind students that comprehension occurs when they think about what they read. The goal of this activity is to help them work on their comprehension so that they have a better understanding of what the text is about. Introduce the name of the activity and tell students which comprehension strategy(ies) the activity works on (connecting, questioning, inferring, determining importance, summarizing and so on). When introducing the response formats described above, tell students why they may like or dislike one more than another so that when they get to choose a response format they can make an informed decision. For example, say “you may like the double entry journal format because it allows you to decide which part of the text you want to respond to. There may be a part of the text that stands out in your mind that you have lots of good thinking about. You get to control the thinking explanation in a double entry journal.” Explain to students that the double entry journal is a simple format that requires them to identify parts of the text that stand out to them on one side of the page and then describe their thinking about the information on the other side of the page. Also, depending on your students, it may be important to specify a minimum length requirement in either a number of sentences, or number or pages.

### ***Modeling.***

Choose a sample text to read together as a class, or an informational text that your students are already familiar with. Make sure your students have a copy of both the text and the black line master for the activity so they can follow along as you read and work. You may wish to have students practice recording your model onto the black line master so they are clear on what information goes where. Read a couple of paragraphs of the text and model your thinking by describing out loud what each section makes you think about. Describe a connection you made to the text and a question you have

about the information. Keep reading. When you come across an interesting or important fact, record it on the left side of your double entry journal for students to see and copy. Then, on the other side of the chart, record your thinking about the information. Try to think aloud and record your thinking simultaneously. For example, you might say and record something like this: “This fact is important because it tells us what this article is about. It is about the dangers of air pollution to human health. It reminds me of a story I saw on the news about pollution from trains in Prince George. People in Prince George are concerned that the emissions from the trains might be affecting their health and making people sick. I wonder if people actually feel sick or if their body is being affected without them noticing.” Continue reading and recording your thinking making sure that you model a connection, a question and an inference.

***Guided practice.***

Once you have modeled and recorded your thinking for students, read another paragraph and together, select another piece of information to record on the left-hand side of the double entry journal. Ask for students to share their thinking about the information and record their thinking on the other side of the journal. Make sure that students copy the information and thinking onto their sheets so that they have good examples of how to complete a double entry journal. If students are struggling to explain their thinking out loud, help students word their ideas effectively. Continue to read the text aloud, selecting information to record and asking for students to share their thinking until you feel they understand what types of thinking you expect from them. Next, continue reading aloud and have students attempt to select a piece of information to record. Discuss their selections as a class and then have students attempt to respond to the information they recorded. Ask students to share their information and thinking with another student, and then have several students share with the class. Record their ideas on your chart. Comment when you see good examples of comprehension strategy use.

***Independent practice.***

Once students begin to show competence at selecting important information from the text, and describing their thinking about it, have them read several paragraphs on their own and record their thinking on their own chart without support. Have students to share with each other and the class. Comment when you see good examples of thinking and comprehension strategy use. Repeat this process with another text if you feel your students need more practice with the response format before they are required to complete responses for the *Information Circles* texts.

***Conclusion.***

Provide students with a similar text to read, but have students read the text and complete their own double-entry journals independently. Tell students to refer to the double entry journals completed as a class if they need to be reminded of the expectations. When finished, have students to share their journals with one another and provide feedback for each other. Collect and read journals and provide written feedback and general whole class feedback before students continue to work on this strategy independently. One effective way of providing feedback is to use student journals as exemplars to model quality responses. Find responses in student work that meets expectations and share them on the overhead (or document reader) for the whole class to see. Ask students to comment on what elements of the response were most effective. This type of whole class feedback often encourages students to revise their responses in future journals. It may also be effective to have students share their journals with one another in order to provide feedback and encourage revision before they hand in their journals for teacher feedback and assessment. It is essential that students know how to complete the required response format(s) before embarking on an *Information Circles* unit.

***Group discussions.***

Faye Brownlie (2005) argues that “the heart of literature circles is the discussion group,” (p. 7) and it is my intention that the same be true for *Information Circles*. Students should be eager to

participate in the discussion groups in order to share their ideas with one another while at the same time deepening their understanding of the texts they have read. As the teacher, you should be present at and participate in the group discussions, but you must strike a balance between being a participant and being the discussion director in charge of who speaks when (Brownlie, 2005). It is important that you find a middle ground between these two extremes as the group facilitator, jumping in and out of discussions as you see fit. It is the role of teacher-lead discussion director that we are attempting to minimize when running these discussion groups in order to have true student-centered discussion circles. The goal of discussion groups is natural, free-flowing, thoughtful conversations, not stilted discussions where students feel they must speak so many times in order to get a good mark. Achieving this goal will require practice and patience as students learn how to share their ideas and take others' ideas into consideration in respectful ways. For example, although it may be tempting to redirect conversation to an important theme or idea you recognize as a main idea, your students may have ideas of their own and lead the discussion in a different, but still relevant pathway. If discussion remains on topic, let the students carry on without redirection. Step back in to redirect only when discussion veers considerably from the topic at hand, or students need help with respectful discussion protocol. It will take time and practice for students to effectively participate in group discussions and as with the reading responses and comprehension strategies students need explicit instruction on the qualities of mature group members, how to be prepared for discussion and the criteria for thoughtful discussions. It is important to take time to teach students how to share their ideas, and not simply expect them to be able to share their ideas without sufficient modeling, and guided practice.

***Criteria for mature group participation.***

Before beginning any group discussion meetings, conduct a whole class lesson on the qualities of mature group members. Ask students to describe what a mature group member looks, sounds and acts like. What qualities do your students value in each other as participants in group discussions?

Middle years' students should be able to assess their previous experiences with group work and come up with at least a partial list of important characteristics.

This list of characteristics comprises the behaviour expectations for group discussions and students must be clearly know what these are. As facilitator, you may need to re-direct and re-focus whole groups or particular students at times in an attempt to develop these qualities in your students.

Student will...

- Come to group fully prepared
- Sit up, look engaged and make eye contact with the speakers
- Keep papers and pens still while others are speaking
- Listen respectfully without interrupting (take turns)
- Respond and add to others' ideas
- Disagree in respectful ways
- Include all participants in the discussion
- Be willing to share feelings, thoughts, ideas, opinions (Brownlie, 2005, pp. 17-25).

After students have spent time discussing and explaining qualities of mature group members, they need an opportunity to see these skills modeled for them, and they need time to practice and refine these skills before they are expected to participate in group discussions independently. I suggest using the 'fishbowl' technique to model what effective and ineffective discussion groups look like. Divide students into three groups. Select 5-6 students to model a discussion group demonstrating an effective group discussion. Select another 5-6 students to model an ineffective group discussion. The rest of the students get to watch these discussions on the 'outside of the fishbowl.' Choose a simple topic for each group to discuss (e.g., favourite hockey team, television show, book), and give each group a few minutes to discuss and prepare their roles. Allow each group to present and after each mock discussion group, ask the students on the outside to comment

on what worked and what did not in each group. Have students share why they think the characteristics in the list above make discussions more effective. If time allows, and students need more time to consolidate these ideas, you may choose another topic and different groups of students and have them repeat the activity and the class discussion afterwards.

***Criteria for thoughtful discussions.***

While the above qualities of mature discussion group members outline the behaviour expectations for students' participation in the discussion group component of *Information Circles*, it is also important to consider what type of commentary teachers should encourage from their students. A student can be a respectful group member that does not interrupt, includes others and stays engaged but not contribute high quality responses to the texts. The following is a list of criteria generated from the Grade 6 English Language Arts IRP (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2006a) Oral language prescribed learning outcomes and suggested achievement indicators and comprises the skills we want students to refine and practice during the course of an *Information Circles* unit.

Students will...

- Explain their own viewpoints and give reasons where applicable
- Summarize and synthesize facts and supporting details
- Use new vocabulary introduced in texts appropriately
- Make meaningful connections between new information and background knowledge
- Ask thoughtful questions and respond to questions with appropriate elaboration
- Makes reasonable predictions/inferences on the topic
- Explain and show understanding of other viewpoints
- Shares feelings, thoughts, ideas, opinions (pp.89-97)

Once again, students will need these skills modeled for them and they will need to practice these skills with support in order to be able to use them effectively in the group discussions. The

fishbowl technique described above would once again be an effective technique to use to model effective and ineffective discussions. Students would be able to practice and watch one another try to determine what type of response would be the most effective or ineffective. The Say Something strategy (Brownlie, 2005) also described above could be adapted to give students time to practice making high quality thoughtful responses as it can be used in a controlled whole class setting. Students could participate in the Say Something strategy and make note of students who met a particular criteria and explain why one student's response was particularly effective. However, students simply need time and practice to consolidate these skills so that they enter into their discussion groups understanding the basic expectations. Students will continue to build and refine their discussion skills throughout the course of the *Information Circles* unit.

#### ***Optimizing group discussions.***

In terms of organization, students need at least one class to prepare to participate in their group discussion, and students should be aware, a day ahead of time, of which groups will be meeting the next day. Some students may need explicit, personalized reminders in order to be prepared for their groups. If you set aside 60-70 minutes for *Information Circles*, three times a week, you should be able to get through at least five group discussions in a week once students are familiar with all the procedures and activities. The first two weeks may be slower. Feel free to extend the time or the length of the cycles if you think you do not have time to meet with the groups as frequently as you would like, or if there are students still interested in discussing a particular set of texts. If you have any other adult support in your classroom, it can be beneficial to have another adult (teaching assistant) meet with groups as well so that students can participate in discussions more frequently. Students may also need time to practice working independently while you are meeting with a group. They will need to know exactly what is expected of them because they will not be able to interrupt a group discussion to ask questions. Dedicate a bulletin board or chalk board to *Information Circles* instructions and make sure students

know where to find the information, black line masters or text copies quietly and on their own while you are occupied.

The following suggestions are included in order to help maximize the quality of group discussions. Take these suggestions into consideration when planning your units:

- Try to keep groups to 4-6 members. Too many members may result in too many voices for everyone to have their ideas heard, and too few members may result in gaps and silences and a lack of ideas on some topics.
- Allow 15-20 minutes for each discussion group. (Shorter texts may require less time). This time allows for every student to have numerous opportunities to respond, but may not allow for every student to share their passage.
- Avoid one student dominating the conversation. If one student repeatedly is first to respond or seems to be dominating the discussion, try directing other students to answer first in order to give everyone a chance to share.
- Insist that students are prepared with their passage/quote to share. Students who are unprepared cannot participate fully in the discussions and you may need them to sit out of a discussion circle if they are not prepared.
- Find a table that all students can fit around. Set up this table in your classroom away from where the other students are working on reading and responding so that the two groups are not distracted by one another. It is important that all students participating in the discussion have a spot at the table and are at the same level as one another so that everyone feels they are an important part of the discussion.
- Be the group facilitator. Model good discussion characteristics but encourage students to participate and answer questions when the discussion stalls. Step back when you are not needed. Most groups at the middle years' level will need the teacher to facilitate the group in

order to have high quality conversations. However, if you feel your students are ready and capable try letting one or two groups meet on their own.

- Open up discussion groups that are not 'full' to other members of the class who have read the text and are interested in discussing it again. These resident 'experts' will bring ideas to the table from their previous discussion(s) that will add to the other students' understanding of the text.
- Allow students who are slowly moving through texts and activities to attend the discussion group for a text more than once if need be. They will build confidence and be better able to participate in the discussion groups.
- Enlist other adults to facilitate group discussions. It is difficult as a teacher of 30 students to run all the group discussions for every text. As it is essential to have students meeting together often, see who else is available to run a discussion group for a particular text. Perhaps the librarian, a resource teacher, principal, teaching assistant or parent volunteer would be able to facilitate a discussion so that more than one group can meet simultaneously.

***Student preparation.***

Students must be prepared for their discussion groups. There is little point in being part of a text-based discussion group if one has not read the text and therefore has little to say. To help students learn how to prepare for their discussion groups so that they can contribute effectively, I suggest that students arrive at their group with their text in hand, a passage/quote marked that they would like to share and be able to explain why they chose it, or why they think it is important (the important information response format would be a helpful scaffold to help students prepare for this step). This passage/quote can be broadly defined to include a sentence, an image, a caption, or anything in the text that the student finds interesting. It is also helpful if students have one deep-thinking question about the text, or an issue the text brings up for them so that there is no lack of discussion topics. It is unlikely

that every student will be able to share their passage and ask their question, but it is better to have too much to discuss than not enough. If time does not allow for all students to share their passage, keep track of who did not get a chance to share and be sure to give them first chance at the next discussion circle. Students should clearly understand that the criteria for being prepared for discussion group is having their text in hand with a passage marked and at least a few notes written down explaining their passage and listing the deep thinking question(s) they would like to share with their group. Some students may wish to bring more recorded thoughts than a few notes.

Brownlie (2005) describes the 'Say Something' strategy as a model for carrying out group discussions during literature circles. I propose a similar model be used for *Information Circles*, but based around student responses to expository texts rather than literature. The Say Something strategy is very simple. Students are given a prompt, and then every student must say one thing about that prompt. It can be a connection, a question, a feeling, a response – basically anything that they think of based on the prompt, but everyone must say something. For *Information Circles* discussion groups, the prompt is the passage that students have selected to share with others. One student starts by sharing their passage and the reasons why they selected it and then discussion moves around the table as everyone must say something about the passage. Students can say anything they like as long as it is appropriate and relevant, but over time, students should be encouraged to connect their ideas to each other and other parts of the text. For example, a student making a great connection might respond to one student's passage with another part of the text that they are reminded of. After all students have had an opportunity to respond and say one thing, the discussion can become more natural and free-flowing with students sharing additional ideas and responding to one another as they desire. The Say Something strategy provides a frame for all students to have an opportunity to respond and requires participation from all group members evenly. One student cannot dominate the discussion when using this strategy and likewise, one student cannot sit back and let the conversation carry on without them as

all students are expected to respond to the passage. Once discussion has ended for the first student's passage, another student can share his/her passage and then discussion can occur around the table in the same manner. As students become more adept and competent at participating effectively in the group discussions, you may elect to phase out the Say Something strategy and allow the conversation to flow in a more natural manner. However, you will still need to ensure that all students are provided with ample opportunity to participate.

### **Culminating activities.**

After students have worked for several weeks reading, responding to and discussing a text set, it is important to capture their learning through a culminating activity. These activities require students to connect the main ideas and important details they have read about and discussed throughout the cycle, and to demonstrate their new knowledge. There are numerous possibilities for culminating activities, but the two described below require the use of multiple literacies as students work to synthesize their ideas and learning into either a poster or oral presentation.

### ***Text feature poster.***

This activity requires students to take the information they have read and learned from each of the texts they read during the cycle and present it in poster format on a single sheet of 11"x 17" paper. Students should begin this activity by referring to and adding to the web graphic organizer they created during the introductory lesson. For example, if all the texts in a set are about pollution, students should be able to significantly expand on their initial web after reading several texts and participating in several discussion circles on the topic. Secondly, students must plan what their poster will look like, and what information it will contain. For example, they must decide on a title and title location, which information is most important and where it will go, and if there are any images/diagrams they think are important enough to be included in the poster. Students must recognize that they need to include information on their poster in ways other than simply written text. To add more depth to this

assignment, you could require students to use 4-7 different text features on their poster including titles, labeled diagrams, captions, bold text, fact boxes, maps, charts, graphs, and so on in order to demonstrate appropriate purposes and uses for each text feature.

***Oral presentation.***

This activity is very similar to the activity above, except that instead of recording ideas on a poster, students are expected to present their synthesized ideas to the class or a small group of peers. Students prepare for this activity in much the same way as the poster, but they will need to spend time practicing and rehearsing their presentation. Once your students are familiar with the expectations of the culminating activity, you may wish to offer students the choice between the poster and presentation so they can choose to represent their learning in the way they see most fit.

***Assessing and evaluating students.***

Ultimately, at the end of the unit you will need to evaluate students' abilities to read and learn from informational texts as well as their abilities to respond to informational texts, and participate effectively in group discussions. You may also have to evaluate the knowledge students have acquired in your content area course. The following suggestions will help you to assess and evaluate the various components of the *Information Circles* unit.

***Assessing reading responses.***

Reading responses are a way for students to demonstrate their comprehension of the texts they have read, specifically the strategies they use during and after their reading. The reading response journals provide evidence of students' abilities to make connections, ask good questions, summarize important information, identify main ideas and details and explain their thoughts and opinions about texts. In Appendix A, you will find a rubric for assessing response journals based on the relevant parts of the Grade 6 British Columbia reading performance standards (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2006a). This rubric addresses two components of the reading response requirements: evidence of

comprehension, and evidence of analysis. When assessing responses for evidence of comprehension, you are looking for student work to be accurate and complete, demonstrate an understanding of main ideas and details in a text and interpret information in order to make inferences. When assessing responses for evidence of analysis, you are looking for students to make connections to other information besides what is explicitly in a text, and to offer their reactions, judgments and opinions about the text at hand. Black line master 9 in Appendix A outlines the characteristics of student responses that meet expectations for demonstrating both evidence of comprehension and evidence of analysis.

Students will complete a considerable number of reading responses over the course of an *Information Circles* unit. Teachers likely do not have the time or desire to collect and assess every response students complete. I suggest having students hand in one response journal a week. Even though this greatly reduces the number of responses to be assessed it is likely you will not use the rubric to assess every single response journal collected. Instead, provide informal written feedback and whole class general feedback to the weekly response journals so that students can make improvements to the quality of their responses. This formative assessment allows for students to refine and develop their response skills before being required to submit responses for summative assessments that will ultimately be graded. You want the student responses that you mark to be representative of each student's best ability. It may be effective to have students pick their best response, or best 2-3 responses to hand in at the end of the unit for formal, summative assessment. However, it is up to you, the teacher to determine how many responses students must complete, how often they must be submitted, and how and when responses are assessed.

#### ***Assessing group discussions.***

There are a few things to consider when assessing the group discussion component of *Information Circles*. First of all, it is important to take notes and keep track of student participation in

discussion groups in order to come up with an overall impression of their abilities, and not just their participation on one particular day. Students will get better at the discussion circles as time goes on, so you do not want to let your initial impressions affect your final assessment of their abilities, which is why it is essential to collect notes on student participation in group discussions throughout the unit. Black line master 12 in Appendix A will help you keep track of student participation in group discussions on a day to day basis. You must also take time to remind students of the criteria for mature group participation and criteria for thoughtful discussion so that students can continually assess and revise their group discussion participation. The same way that students need quality feedback in order to revise their reading responses, they also need quality feedback in order to improve the quality of their oral language responses.

Secondly, it is important to directly assess the quality of students' participation and responses during the group discussions. In Appendix A, you will find a rubric for assessing group discussions based on the relevant parts of the Grade 6 British Columbia English language arts curriculum (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2006a). This rubric addresses the two dimensions of discussion criteria discussed above: evidence mature group participation, and evidence of thoughtful response. When assessing students for evidence of mature group participation, you are looking for student preparation, engagement, respectful listening, appropriate responses to others and a willingness to share thoughts and ideas. When assessing students' discussion participation for evidence of thoughtful response, you are looking for students to identify key ideas, make thoughtful connections, ask relevant questions, make predictions and inferences, express and support their viewpoints, use new vocabulary appropriately and build on others' ideas. Black line master 10 in Appendix A outlines the characteristics of student discussion group participations that meets expectations for demonstrating both evidence of mature group participation and evidence of thoughtful response.

***Assessing culminating activities.***

When assessing the culminating activities, you are looking for two things: do students demonstrate an understanding of main ideas and details from several texts in the text set, and do you see evidence of students connecting ideas together between texts in the text set. You may also choose to assess whether or not students demonstrate appropriate use of text features if they select to complete the text feature poster. The culminating activities are both summative assessments of student learning during the course of an *Information Circles* cycle.

The following is a list of criteria you can use to assess students' culminating activities:

- Information on poster or in presentation is from more than one text.
- Information is organized in a logical sequence
- Key ideas are well represented
- Important supporting details are present
- Information from several texts is connected together (i.e., in a list, comparison, chart etc.)
- Poster or presentation is clear, easy to understand and shows evidence of revision

***Final evaluation.***

After keeping track of students' growth, development and participation in the various components of *Information Circles* there are a few final things to consider when coming up with final unit evaluations for *Information Circles*:

- How many texts did the student complete? It is useful to set a minimum number of texts students must read in order to minimally meet, meet, and exceed expectations. (The difficulty level and length of these texts may be affected by students' individual learning needs.)

- How many discussion groups did the student participate in? Excessive absences, poor preparation, disruptive behaviour, and the amount of time spent on each text may result in a student attending fewer than required discussion groups.
- Quality of group discussion participation as assessed by rubrics, notes and student self-evaluations.
- Quality (and to a lesser extent, quantity) of reading responses. Do students
- Quality of culminating activity. Does the culminating activity demonstrate that students have gained content knowledge on the topic? Does the culminating activity demonstrate that students can connect/summarize/synthesize ideas between texts?
- *Information Circles* Unit Self-Evaluation (see Appendix A).

In the end, your final assessments and evaluations of students' participation in *Information Circles* will depend on the particular learning outcomes you have decided to report on, and the weight you assign to each of the key components of *Information Circles* (reading response, discussion groups, culminating activities).

### **Summary**

*Information Circles* is a teacher resource intended to help teachers provide engaging, quality instruction using informational texts. This resource was built on the pedagogical foundations of extended time for literacy, explicit comprehension instruction, diverse texts, student choice, and student talk about texts as best practices for adolescent literacy. The *Information Circles resource* provides background information, curriculum connections and detailed implementation procedures for teachers to read and follow in order to enact this structure in their own classrooms. I hope that this resource can be a valuable tool for middle years' teachers trying to integrate content area instruction with reading and oral language instruction.

## Chapter 4

### Reflection

#### Beginning the Journey

I began my Master's degree after only three years of work as a teacher in School District #57 in Prince George, BC. I had spent two years working as a part time TOC and part time Grade 6/7 limited duration classroom teacher and one year working full time in a middle school with a class of Grade 6 students. My year at the middle school was tiring and troublesome at best. I ended the year with more office referrals in my class file than could fit in the binder. My students were eager, but lacked self-control and struggled immensely with the transition from the structure and control of elementary school and the freedom that being part of a middle school with 700 students afforded them. On more than one occasion I drove home in tears because I simply did not have enough strategies to keep them contained, let alone working anywhere near the potential I could see in them. The learning needs were diverse and wide-ranging; I had 2 students with mild intellectual disabilities, 1 with severe behaviour issues, a handful whose reading and writing abilities were well-below grade level expectations and little to no support from teaching assistants or resource teachers. I was a novice teacher with a difficult class and I can admit now that I did not even know where or how to begin teaching the language and literacy skills my students were lacking. It was a less than ideal placement for an expert teacher, let alone a novice.

The program at the University of Victoria was not the first Master's program I applied for. My first application had been to a program to become a teacher-librarian. I did not get in, and I moved on – thinking maybe it was too early in my career for a Master's degree. I then heard about the middle years' cohort by chance very close to the application deadline. And, I was intrigued by the content: middle years' language and literacy, the exact area I was struggling with the most. I had completed my B.Ed. at UVIC in 2006, and was eager to spend more time in the Faculty of Education. The decision turned out to

be one of the best I ever made. The two courses I took during the first summer session changed not only my entire language arts program, but also my focus in the content area subjects I taught. I was introduced to the work of Allington (2002), Atwell, (2007) and Pearson (2009) and I continue to soak up everything they have to say about teaching language and literacy. In that time I also happened to move schools and I began teaching Grade 6/7 at a semi-rural elementary school in my district that September. It was a fresh start for both me and my students as we had both spent the previous year disillusioned by our school experiences.

My second year working full-time in my own classroom was entirely different than my first. I do not think I re-used a single unit from the previous year, and my summer experience had, at the very least given me a direction and focus in my literacy teaching. I set up a reading corner, developed a classroom library, spent time reading aloud to my students, taught comprehension strategies and dove into literature circles. My students spent vast amounts of time absorbed in the “Reading Zone,” (Atwell, 2007), and begged to spend more time “just plain reading” (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001). However, as much my literature program developed and grew, I continued to struggle with engaging my students with informational texts. Personally, I was not that interested in them myself, and had very few I could even recommend for my students to read. But, I could see them struggling with reading their textbooks, reading on the Internet, and reading any of the expository articles I did manage to include in my instruction.

### **Selecting a Topic**

I arrived at my topic choice of informational text comprehension in a very roundabout way. I was well aware of the struggles my students were having reading and engaging with informational texts, but I did not have a concrete grasp of the problem or any idea of what to do about it. I had also been to several of Adrienne Gear’s *Reading Power* (2006) workshops and was drawn to research on comprehension strategy instruction. Further, I had been inspired by the content of the chapter by Ogle

Blachowicz (2002) and the article by Moss (2005). Both of these documents seemed to address the very problem I could not figure out how to address in my classroom; my students' dismal performance reading and responding to informational texts. I was excited reading about the importance of reading informational texts at the elementary level, the reasons students find them difficult, and about expository text features – an idea I had never even considered. At the same time, the literacy focus of my school was on teaching Gear's (2008) nonfiction reading strategies. I dabbled with these strategies, but only managed to fit in instruction on text features, something my students had also never considered. Despite my acknowledgment of expository comprehension strategies as crucial to my students' success, I struggled to integrate them into my classroom practice. There simply seemed to be too much content to cover, and not enough time to cover it.

It seemed important to my practice to select a topic that I could bring back to my staff to incorporate into our school literacy program. I was not the only teacher struggling to incorporate nonfiction reading strategies, but I was also interested in drawing on my students' keen interest in spending time in the computer lab, and spent a significant amount of time trying to come up with a resource idea that combined reading informational texts on the internet with writing classroom blogs. In the end, I abandoned that idea for my final topic choice: comprehension of informational texts through an engaging format I called *Information Circles*. It was my hope that these *Information Circles* could get my students as excited about reading and discussing expository texts as they already were about reading and discussing fiction through literature circles.

### **Research and Literature Review**

Researching and writing the literature review was by far the most difficult process for me. I really struggled to find current, relevant articles, particularly primary research that addressed the issues I needed to discuss. It was particularly difficult to find primary research relating specifically to middle years' students, and primary research on the application of literature circles in the classroom. I was able

to find lots of research on the importance of informational texts at the primary level which has been a significant focus of Nell Duke's work (Caswell & Duke, 1998; Duke, 2000; Duke, Bennett-Armistead, & Roberts, 2003; Purcell-Gates, Duke & Martineau, 2007), and there is much to be said about informational reading and secondary students, but for some reason the students in-between have been left out of the research. Students in Grades 5-8 have their own learning needs that are not addressed by either end of the spectrum. Secondly, research on literature circles is problematic due to a lack of consensus on terminology. The term literature circles has been attached to many classroom practices that are far from the true spirit of student-led discussions based around quality literature imagined by Daniels (2002a, 2002b). And, many classroom practices that do reflect this spirit are called by many other names including book clubs and reading groups. I was also easily led astray by topics that were related but not wholly important to the goals of my project. I was sidetracked several times by research that was outside the scope of my project and found it difficult to refocus on what I actually needed to say. That being said, the process of researching, reading and writing was very non-linear for me; I went back and forth between each of these actions many times throughout the process.

Despite these difficulties I learned a lot about the worlds of comprehension strategy instruction, content area literacy, and best practices in adolescent literacy. I learned that although the research on the need for the explicit teaching of comprehension strategies is clear, the ways to incorporate it into instruction are incredibly diverse. I learned that teachers of all subjects need to be cognizant of the texts they select for their students and that regardless of how great a text might be, students cannot learn anything from texts that are written above their reading level. Teachers must incorporate a much wider range of diverse and accessible texts in their classrooms than the traditional textbook if they truly want to engage their students with informational reading. Finally, I learned that the principles of effective reading instruction (time, teaching, tasks, texts, talk and tests) I learned about from my first experience with Allington's (2002b) work in the first course I took in this program are as relevant to

Kindergarten students as they are to Grade 12 advanced mathematics students; good teaching is good teaching is good teaching.

### **Creating the Resource**

I spent a long time deciding on how I was going to put together my resource. My previous experience with incorporating literature circles in my classroom, and my desire to modify the literature circle experience for use with informational texts formed the foundation of what I wanted my resource to be. I also was well aware of the need for students to receive explicit instruction in comprehension strategies and wanted to incorporate strategy activities that I thought would help middle years' students better understand informational texts. It took a lot of thought and deliberation to decide how the various components of *Information Circles* were going to look and I spent a lot of time trying to determine just how much work I wanted students to do for each text. The concern that students would get bogged down in paperwork and not be able to fully participate in *Information Circles* as I had envisioned them was a very real consideration to me throughout the process. I knew I had to find a balance between independent and group tasks so that *Information Circles* would run smoothly in classrooms where one teacher and 28-30 students are the norm.

My inspiration for this format came from three places: Faye Browlie (2005), Kelly Gallagher and Adrienne Gear (2006; 2008). Brownlie's model of literature circles in *Grand Conversations, Thoughtful Response: A Unique Approach to Literature Circles* is one I have used successfully in my own classroom. I particularly like her model because it allows students to move through texts at their own pace, rather than having to stop and wait at predetermined spots in a book in order to have a discussion. The discussions flow as students move fluidly in and out of groups based on their individual reading abilities. I was inspired by Kelly Gallagher's (2009) article of the week assignment because it draws students' attention to current events through a weekly close reading of an informational text. Like Gallagher, I have seen my students struggle to understand content area topics due to a distinct lack of background

knowledge. The article of the week assignment was Gallagher's attempt to increase his students' background knowledge on important issues. Finally, Adrienne Gear's *Reading Power* (2006; 2008) books were my first introduction to comprehension strategy instruction, and it was her workshops that first engrained in me the importance of strategy instruction for all students. I appreciate her method of strategy instruction because it is easy to understand and follow, and uses high quality informational trade books to introduce and teach the strategies. In creating my resource, *Information Circles*, I have attempted to weave what I like about each of these resources into a unique approach for teaching students to read and understand informational texts.

I enjoyed the process of creating the resource because it allowed me to apply what I had learned from my research in a practical way that I hope will benefit teachers other than me. I spent a lot of time thinking about how to design the *Information Circles* resource so that middle years' teachers of many subjects would find it valuable – not just language arts teachers. Since I am a Grade 6/7 teacher in an elementary school setting, I realize that I have more opportunities to integrate my language arts and content area instruction than teachers who teach the same grade level in a middle school, so I really wanted a variety of options for implementation of this program. I hope I have accomplished this goal by providing a framework that allows for teachers to use texts relevant to their purposes, and select strategies and response formats that match the needs of their students. In the end, what is important is that more and more of our middle years' students become better at reading and understanding the informational texts that they choose and are expected to read.

### **What the Future May Bring**

I am far from finished with this topic. I returned to work in February, and am planning to focus my content area instruction during the second half of the year on informational text comprehension strategies and am excited about implementing *Information Circles* with my health and career education

curriculum. It is my hope that the *Information Circles* format will draw out the voices, opinions and ideas of my students in ways that whole class instruction simply did not or cannot.

Further, I would like to share this resource with my colleagues; first within my own school as I know the topic is relevant to teachers in my school, and secondly with other teachers in my district. I have visions of one day presenting my resource in a workshop to other interested teachers. I believe that I have valuable information that I can share with other teachers who are struggling with the same issues of informational text comprehension that I have been dealing with in my own classroom. However, I would like time to practice and play with this resource in my own classroom before I travel down that path. Finally, I would like to compile text sets to use and share that gather texts around a common theme for teachers to use in their own applications of *Information Circles*. I see gathering the texts as one of the biggest obstacles for teachers beginning to implement *Information Circles* in their own classrooms. I know other teachers would appreciate having text sets already selected and created for them as it is a time-consuming process.

### **Final Thoughts**

In conclusion, I would like you to take a moment and think about the middle years' students you know. Think about their likes, dislikes, interests and passions. Think about their engagement with school activities, and think about their literacy development. With these thoughts in mind, what do you think they read today? A newspaper, magazine, graphic novel or comic book? A few chapters from their English novel, or an article for their Science homework? Perhaps the dialogue in the new video game that came out this week. Nothing? Middle years' students may claim that they do not read outside of school, but there is significant evidence indicating the very opposite (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Pitcher et al., 2007). At the very least, middle years' students are reading vast amounts of informational text in their daily and educational lives: magazines, maps, bus schedules, reference materials, how-to-guides, recipes, emails, instant messages, road signs and Internet sites, textbooks, articles – or any number of

other texts (visual or print) that convey information to the reader about the natural and social world (Duke, 2000). While some of these texts may seem like simple and mundane reading activities, the ability to comprehend these informational texts is vital for our students' success after they leave our classrooms. It is my hope that my *Information Circles* project will help prepare middle years' students to interact effectively with the informational texts they will encounter in and out of the classroom.

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**Appendix A**

**BLM #1 – Text/Discussion Completion Checklist**

Date: _____	Text Title:												
Class: _____													
													
Mark Read/Discussed													
1.													
2.													
3.													
4.													
5.													
6.													
7.													
8.													
9.													
10.													
11.													
12.													
13.													
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18.													
19.													
20.													
21.													
22.													
23.													
24.													
25.													
26.													
27.													
28.													

**BLM #2 – Assignment Completion Checklist**

<b>Date:</b> _____ <b>Class:</b> _____ 	<b>Assignment Name:</b>													
Check complete/Mark														
1.														
2.														
3.														
4.														
5.														
6.														
7.														
8.														
9.														
10.														
11.														
12.														
13.														
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21.														
22.														
23.														
24.														
25.														
26.														
27.														
28.														

**BLM #3 – Reading Record**

<b>Name:</b>		<b>Class:</b>
<b>Date:</b>	<b>Text Title:</b>	<b>What I think:</b>

**BLM #4 – Double Entry Journal (Free)**

<b>Name:</b>	<b>Class:</b>
<b>Quote/Main Idea: (include title/page #)</b>	<b>My Thinking: (connections, questions, inferences, thoughts, opinions)</b>

Adapted From: Brownlie, F. (2005). *Grand conversations, thoughtful responses: A unique approach to literature circles*. Winnipeg, MB: Portage & Main Press.

**BLM #5 – Double Entry Journal (Guided)**

<b>Name:</b>	<b>Class:</b>
<b>Quote/Main Idea: (include title/page #)</b>	<b>My Thinking: (connections, questions, inferences, thoughts, opinions)</b>
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	

Adapted From: Tovani, C. (2004). *Do I really have to teach reading: Content comprehension grades 6-12*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.

## BLM #6 – Six Square Thinking Chart

<b>Name:</b>	<b>Class:</b>
<b>Summary:</b> Give a brief explanation of what the text is about...	<b>Knew/New:</b> Something you already knew and one new thing you learned from this text...
<b>Questions:</b> What are you still wondering about?	<b>Inferences:</b> What are some possible answers to your questions?
<b>Visualization:</b> Draw and label a picture that shows one thing you learned from the text	<b>Connections:</b> This text reminds me of... (t-s)(t-t)(t-w)

## BLM #7 – Important Information Chart

<b>Name:</b>		<b>Class:</b>	
<b>What I already KNEW...</b>		<b>What I learned NEW...</b>	
<b>What's Important?</b>	<b>Why?</b>	<b>My Thinking: (Connections, Questions, Comments, etc.)</b>	
<b>1.</b>			
<b>2.</b>			
<b>3.</b>			

Adapted From: Close, S. (2005). Smart-Thinking Tools. (in press). Retrieved from <http://www.smartreading.ca>

## BLM #9 – Reading Response Assessment Rubric

Reading Response Assessment Rubric				
Grade 6				
Aspect	Not Yet Within Expectations	Meets Expectations (Minimal Level)	Fully Meets Expectations	Exceeds Expectations
	1	2	3	4
<b>Evidence of Comprehension</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accuracy and completeness</li> <li>• Main ideas</li> <li>• Details</li> <li>• Inferences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often inaccurate, vague, incomplete</li> <li>• Confuses main idea and supporting details</li> <li>• May identify some relevant supporting details; omits a great deal</li> <li>• Misinterprets literal information</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partially accurate, but may be vague, incomplete</li> <li>• Identifies most main ideas; has trouble restating in own words</li> <li>• Identifies some relevant supporting details</li> <li>• Makes some inferences, but these may be illogical</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear, complete, accurate</li> <li>• Accurately identifies main ideas</li> <li>• Identifies relevant supporting details</li> <li>• Makes some inferences; may be unsupported</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Precise, thorough; may be insightful</li> <li>• Accurately restates main ideas; may explain how they connect</li> <li>• Identifies specific, relevant details; thorough</li> <li>• Makes and supports simple inferences</li> </ul>
<b>Evidence of Analysis</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connections to other information</li> <li>• Reactions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has difficulty connecting new information to prior knowledge (may have little prior knowledge)</li> <li>• Reactions or judgments are often vague and unsupported</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Makes some simple obvious connections between new information and prior knowledge</li> <li>• Offers some simple reactions or judgments; reasons are often vague</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Makes logical connections between new information and prior knowledge and beliefs</li> <li>• Offers simple reactions or judgments; reasons may be vague</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compares new information to prior knowledge and beliefs; may show insight</li> <li>• Offers reactions or judgments with reasons; may evaluate information</li> </ul>

Adapted From: British Columbia Ministry of Education. (2009). *BC performance standards: reading grade 6*. Retrieved from [http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/perf\\_stands/reading\\_g6.pdf](http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/perf_stands/reading_g6.pdf).

### BLM #10 – Group Discussion Assessment Rubric

Group Discussion Assessment Rubric				
Aspect	Not Yet Within Expectations	Meets Expectations (Minimal Level)	Fully Meets Expectations	Exceeds Expectations
	1	2	3	4
<b>Evidence of Mature Group Participation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Preparation</li> <li>Engagement</li> <li>Respectful listening</li> <li>Response to others</li> <li>Willingness to share</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Does not arrive at group prepared (missing text, passage or thoughts to share)</li> <li>Appears unengaged (distracted, looks away, fidgeting)</li> <li>Does not look at or listen to speaker, often interrupts</li> <li>Does not respond to others' ideas, or responds inappropriately. Does not attempt to include others</li> <li>Unwilling to share thoughts and ideas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Arrives to group with some preparation (text, passage, thoughts to share)</li> <li>Mostly engaged (some distractions, lack of focus)</li> <li>Sometimes looks at and listens to speaker. Interrupts occasionally</li> <li>Rarely responds to others' ideas. Struggles to disagree appropriately. Does not include all others.</li> <li>Willing to share thoughts and ideas on occasion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Arrives to group prepared (has text, passage selected, thoughts to share ready)</li> <li>Appears engaged (focused on speaker, not distracted)</li> <li>Looks at and listens to speaker. Does not interrupt.</li> <li>Attempts to respond to others' ideas. Disagrees appropriately. Includes others in conversations</li> <li>Willing and ready to share thoughts and ideas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Arrives to group prepared (has text, passage to share, reasons for selecting, has questions, thoughts and ideas to share)</li> <li>Engaged and focused on speaker and conversation</li> <li>Looks at and listens to speaker. Does not interrupt. Makes eye contact, nods, uses nonverbal cues.</li> <li>Responds effectively to others' ideas. Disagrees appropriately. Attempts to include others who may be struggling.</li> <li>Willing and ready to share thoughts and ideas. Has a lot to share</li> </ul>
<b>Evidence of Thoughtful Discussion</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Key Ideas</li> <li>Thoughtful Connections</li> <li>Relevant Questions</li> <li>Predictions and Inferences</li> <li>Expression of Views</li> <li>Vocabulary Use</li> <li>Building on Ideas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Can only identify key ideas with teacher support</li> <li>Does not make connections to prior knowledge or experiences</li> <li>Asks relevant questions, with teacher support</li> <li>Answers questions to makes predictions and inferences with teacher support</li> <li>Sometimes offers own views appropriately, often without reasons</li> <li>Cannot use new vocabulary from text</li> <li>Builds on others' ideas, with teacher support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Can recall some key ideas from text. Missing important details.</li> <li>Makes weak or un related connections to prior knowledge or experiences</li> <li>Asks some relevant questions</li> <li>Answers questions to makes some predictions and inferences</li> <li>Generally expresses own views appropriately; gives few relevant reasons</li> <li>Rarely uses new vocabulary from text</li> <li>Occasionally builds on others' ideas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Accurately recalls key ideas and details from text</li> <li>Makes strong connections to prior knowledge or experiences</li> <li>Asks questions to sustain and extend interactions</li> <li>Answers questions to make predictions and inferences</li> <li>Expresses own views appropriately, with supporting reasons</li> <li>Attempts to use new vocabulary from text</li> <li>Builds on others' ideas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Restates key ideas and details in own words. Builds on ideas.</li> <li>Makes effective connections to prior knowledge or experiences. Links ideas well.</li> <li>Asks a variety of questions to sustain and extend interactions, and find out others' views</li> <li>Answers questions to make thoughtful predictions and inferences</li> <li>Expresses own views effectively, with some convincing reasons</li> <li>Uses new vocabulary from text effectively</li> <li>Builds on others' ideas to deepen thinking</li> </ul>

Adapted From: British Columbia Ministry of Education. (2006). *English language arts integrated resource package K-7*. Retrieved from [http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/irp/pdfs/english\\_language\\_arts/2006ela\\_k7.pdf](http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/irp/pdfs/english_language_arts/2006ela_k7.pdf)

**BLM #11 – Information Circles Student Self-Assessment**

<b>Name:</b>	<b>Class:</b>
<b>Date:</b>	
<b>Information Circle Self-Assessment</b>	
<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Comments/Feedback</b>
<b>Preparation:</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Has text ready <input type="checkbox"/> Has read whole text <input type="checkbox"/> Passage selected and marked <input type="checkbox"/> Response Journal complete	
<b>Sharing Your Thoughts:</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Speaks loudly/clearly, makes eye contact <input type="checkbox"/> Shares something meaningful <input type="checkbox"/> Explains reasons for choosing passage <input type="checkbox"/> Explains opinions/views with reasons <input type="checkbox"/> Explains connections	
<b>Responding to Others:</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Listens respectfully <input type="checkbox"/> Looks at speaker <input type="checkbox"/> Does not interrupt/distract <input type="checkbox"/> Asks/answers questions <input type="checkbox"/> Builds on others' ideas <input type="checkbox"/> Disagrees respectfully	

Adapted From: Brownlie, F. (2005). *Grand conversations, thoughtful responses: A unique approach to literature circles*. Winnipeg, MB: Portage & Main Press.



## Appendix B

### Additional comprehension strategy activities.

As increased comprehension of texts is one of the goals of *Information Circles*, it is important to include activities in the unit that help further develop students' comprehension skills and give them practice using a variety of comprehension strategies. While the response journals described in Chapter 3 require students to use and describe their use of a range of comprehension strategies, there may be some strategies not specifically addressed by the response journals that meet your curriculum requirements or the needs of your particular students. The response journals allow for the free-flow of thoughts and ideas, and while they do provide a glimpse into the minds of your students, they do not necessarily enable students to practice specific strategies such as summarizing, taking notes and using text features. Also, response journals allow for students to decide which aspects of their thinking they write about, resulting in some strategies possibly being ignored by students. Use the activities described in this section instead of or in addition to the response formats described in Chapter 3, or when you feel your students need extra practice with a particular strategy. Alternatively, the response formats in Chapter 3 can be replaced by any of the activities in this section according to student need. As with any new skill, these comprehension activities need to be explicitly taught and modeled, and students need practice using the strategies with guidance before being expected to complete activities independently (Duke & Pearson, 2002; Pearson & Gallagher, 1983).

The following section describes comprehension strategy activities that will develop students' abilities to make connections, ask questions, make inferences, identify main idea and details, summarize and synthesize ideas effectively. These strategies are explained in more detail in Chapter 2.

**Illuminating connections (adapted from Brownlie, 2007).**

This activity requires students to focus on fully explaining their connections and not simply saying “this reminds me of my brother,” or other similar response without any explanation. Connections are only meaningful and only help facilitate comprehension when they are related to the information in the text. Unrelated connections only distract readers from understanding the text at hand. This activity requires students to explain why they had a connection to a particular piece of information which helps build stronger connections. For example, students making connections to an informational text on British Columbia’s Japanese internment camps might make a connection to concentration camps in Europe. This activity can help students strengthen their connections by answering why they made a particular connection; in this example, students might say “because both types of camps took people away from their homes and belongings and separated families.” This explanation shows that the student can make connections between the similarities of the two events. Use this activity when you need your students to work on deepening their connections by explaining them fully. (See black line master 13.)

**OWI – observe, wonder, infer (adapted from Brownlie, 2007).**

This activity can help students to ask questions and make inferences based on images or pictures from informational texts. Students or teachers can select the image to attach to the top half of the page (or students can draw their own visual representation), and students use the three columns on the bottom of the page to record their observations, questions and inferences about the image. Students should be encouraged to record multiple observations, questions and inferences and not simply the first one that comes to mind. Students who struggle with the inference column can be prompted to ask deep-thinking questions and then make an attempt to answer them in the inference column. Use this activity if your students require more practice asking questions and making inferences about images and visual representations of text. (See black line master 14.)

**What? So what? Now what? (adapted from Brownlie, 2007).**

This activity combines questioning and inferring together into one column but also asks students to identify why the fact they have selected is important. Students select facts from the text to record in the first column, but must justify their importance in the second column before responding with their questions and inferences. Use this activity if you want your students to continue to practice generating questions and making inferences, but also want them to focus on selecting important information from the text to respond to. (See black line master 15.)

**5-3-1 summary (adapted from Brownlie, 2007).**

This activity requires students to identify key words in a text and then use the key words to create a summary. Students come up with five key words or word pairs independently, and then work with a partner to pick the three most important words from each partner's list. Partners then discuss with a small group to come up with the most important word in the text, and write a brief justification as to how and why their group selected the one key word. Finally, each student works independently to write a short summary of the text in the right hand column of their sheet. Use this activity if you want your students to practice identifying key words in collaboration and writing short summary responses to text. (See black line master 16.)

**Reading like a scientist (adapted from Brownlie, Close & Wingren, 1988).**

This activity requires students to identify key vocabulary words, create visual representations, ask questions, and list main ideas in response to a text. Student responses are divided amongst four quadrants on the page. Key vocabulary words and definitions students encounter are collected in one quadrant. In the second quadrant, students record any questions they are wondering while they read. After students have finished reading the text, they draw or create visual representations of main ideas in one quadrant and record main ideas in bulleted points in the last quadrant. This activity requires students to use several strategies and thinking processes simultaneously. Use this activity when

students are proficient at collecting key words and main ideas, but need practice using the strategies concurrently. (See black line master 17.)

**Draw it; recall it (adapted from Brownlie, 2007).**

This activity requires students to draw important information from text and then recall four important facts about each image. Students draw and label their images on one side of the page and then record key facts in bulleted forms across from the image. Use this activity for students who are struggling with locating key ideas and summarizing, or students who struggle with written expression. This activity requires much less written work than some of the other summarizing strategies but still requires students to locate and record key ideas. (See black line master 18.)

**BLM #13 – Illuminating Your Connections**

<b>Name:</b>		<b>Class:</b>	
<b>What I read:</b> Quote or text summary	<b>My Connections: (t-s) (t-t) (t-w)</b> This reminds me of...	<b>Because:</b> Explanation of connection	

*Adapted From: Brownlie, F. (2007). DART: District assessment of reading team. British Columbia: Consortium of British Columbia School Districts.*

**BLM #14 – OWI**

<b>Name:</b>		<b>Class:</b>	
<b>(Draw/Place Image Here)</b>			
<b>I Observe...</b>	<b>I Wonder...</b>	<b>I Infer...</b>	

*Adapted From: Brownlie, F. (2007). DART: District assessment of reading team. British Columbia: Consortium of British Columbia School Districts.*

**BLM #15 – What? So What? Now What?**

<b>Name:</b>		<b>Class:</b>
<b>What?</b> (Record a fact in written, or visual form)	<b>So What?</b> (Why is this information important?)	<b>Now What?</b> (Questions and Maybes...)

Adapted From: Brownlie, F. (2007). *DART: District assessment of reading team*. British Columbia: Consortium of British Columbia School Districts.

**BLM #16 – 5-3-1 Summary**

<b>Name:</b>	<b>Class:</b>
<p><b>On your own, write down FIVE key words from the text:</b></p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	<p><b>Response:</b> (Write a summary of this text using the key words – What is important in this text?)</p>
<p><b>With a partner, decide on THREE key words from each of your lists:</b></p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	
<p><b>With a small group choose ONE key word for the text:</b></p> <hr/>	
<p><b>Explain why your group chose this ONE word:</b></p>	

**BLM #17 – Reading Like a Scientist**

<b>Name:</b>	<b>Class:</b>
<b>Key Words:</b> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	<b>I'm Wondering:</b>
<b>Important Images:</b>	<b>Main Ideas:</b> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>

Adapted From: Brownlie, F., Close, S., & Wingren, L. (1988). *Reading for higher thought*. Edmonton, AB: Alberta Education.

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## BLM #18 – Draw It, Recall It

<b>Name:</b>	<b>Class:</b>
<b>Text Title:</b>	
<b>Draw and label an important image from the text:</b>	<b>Recall important facts about this image:</b> _____ _____ _____ _____
<b>Draw and label an important image from the text:</b>	<b>Recall important facts about this image:</b> _____ _____ _____ _____
<b>Draw and label an important image from the text:</b>	<b>Recall important facts about this image:</b> _____ _____ _____ _____
<b>Draw and label an important image from the text:</b>	<b>Recall important facts about this image:</b> _____ _____ _____ _____