Growing a Passion: Reflections and Practices on Teaching Literature Circles in the Middle Years

by

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B.S.W., University of Victoria, 1989
B.Ed, University of Victoria, 1994

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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

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The purpose of this project is to examine the research base on the use of literature circles, and to provide an appropriate model for professional learning. Literature circles are small-group, student-led book clubs engaging students in authentic conversations about books they chose to read. This project includes three components: a review of the foundational literature and current research on the theoretical and pedagogical understanding of literature circles; a survey of the literature on teacher professional learning; and a guide for a 5-part professional learning series on literature circles.
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Dedication

This project is dedicated to my daughters, Lia and Kali. It is my hope that in your classrooms you will know the joy of engaging in rich and meaningful conversations about books you want to read. And by talking about what matters to you, may you learn more about yourself, others, and the world. I love you with all of my heart.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Background: A Responsibility

I have been an intermediate and middle school teacher for 16 years. In my current position as Literacy Curriculum Coordinator for the Sooke School District - one I have held for the past 4 years - I am responsible for providing in-service and support for grades 4-9 teachers in their literacy teaching practices. This position has me continually seeking to learn more about effective literacy practices for the classroom setting, and was the impetus to pursue my graduate studies in the area of Language and Literacy.

I am in a unique position as Literacy Coordinator, as I work with teachers outside their classrooms discussing promising practices, co-planning lessons, and constructing knowledge together, as well as inside their classrooms doing demonstration lessons, co-teaching, and kid-watching. With this privilege, I feel, comes great responsibility to do what I can to support the students and the teachers in our district. In my time inside classrooms, I have seen a variety of practices in the teaching of reading, some consistent with what we know is good practice based on current research, and some that is not. I hear teachers’ stories of kids who resist reading, and others who are engaged in reading. Much of this discrepancy has to do with the types of instructional practices employed in classrooms. We know through Vygotsky’s work that learners construct their own knowledge, and do so in a social context through conversation. It leads me to wonder why more teachers are not using one of the most effective, research-based oral-language and reading strategies - literature circles. This practice is powerful, engaging, and appropriate for effective literacy instruction. It challenges the strong readers and supports the striving and reluctant readers. Through my own practice I discovered the deep
potential of literature circles for engaging all readers in collaboratively constructing meanings of books.

In my role supporting teachers’ practices, I am constantly seeking ways to encourage and support their professional learning. I find myself questioning how to best facilitate teachers’ learning of literature circles. My reason for doing this research project is to contribute to the improvement of reading instruction. When individuals’ stories about their experiences of literature circles are told we can gain insights into how best to teach and to learn about literature circles.

**Purpose of the Project: A Passion**

The purpose of this project, ultimately, is to encourage the expansion of literature circles into more intermediate and middle school level classrooms so that all students are engaged in reading books of their choice and constructing the meanings of books with others; in Harvey Daniels’ (1994) terms, “to grow the (literature circle) club”. I share my dream with Atwell (2007) - to provide a vehicle through which every child can become a skilled, passionate, and habitual reader. I want to share my passion with other teachers in a way that makes it feel possible and manageable to embark on a journey of learning to implement this powerful instructional strategy that honours the diverse needs in a classroom. In doing so, I first uncovered the most promising practices in conducting literature circles at the intermediate and middle school level. I then determined the features or conditions of teacher professional learning that are most likely to lead to change in teacher practice. I also reflected on my own journey of learning and teaching literature circles. Combining the literature and my personal reflections, I designed a guide for a professional learning series to support teachers in learning and teaching literature
circles. Specifically, this project provides a plan for how to facilitate professional learning of literature circles for intermediate and middle level teachers. Ideally, this project will serve as a reference both for classroom teachers who wish to embark on learning and teaching literature circles, and for staff developers who wish to provide an effective model for this professional learning. It is my intention to implement this series in my role as a district literacy curriculum coordinator.

**Significance of the Project: A Hope**

There has been much written on the instructional strategy of literature circles, and what emerges is the variety of models used in classrooms. While this instructional strategy is not new, it is not a regular practice in many intermediate and middle school classrooms that I visit despite its wide acceptance as an effective and engaging practice in the teaching of reading. The B.C. Ministry of Education English Language Arts Integrated Resource Package (2006) lists literature circles as a recommended instructional strategy. It is my hope that this project will provide teachers with a theoretical and pedagogical understanding of literature circles, and be a starting place for implementing literature circles in their classrooms. I also hope this project serves as a guide for staff developers to facilitate professional learning in literature circles so that more teachers ‘join the club’ and more students enjoy meaningful conversations about books.

**Design of the Project: A Plan**

This project includes a literature review of the foundational literature and current research in literature circles. In conducting this review, I focused my search on those studies carried out in intermediate and middle level language arts classrooms. I was
especially interested in studies that highlighted teachers examining problematic experiences in the use of literature circles, and the findings and solutions they offered. I focused my literature search of teacher professional learning on studies that examined the conditions or features that facilitated or impeded change in teacher practice. With the belief that we learn through the stories told, and in order to give a context for professional learning in literature circles, I have included a reflective narrative of my own learning and teaching of literature circles over the past 10 years. Finally, I have created a plan for a professional learning series to facilitate the teaching and learning of literature circles for intermediate and middle school level teachers.

**Limitations of the Project**

Literature circles look different in every classroom; depending on the teacher, the grade, and the students. And so they should. There is no recipe for literature circles, nor is it a ‘program’. I write this guide coming from the belief that true engagement with literature within a community of learners can’t be prescribed; it can only be described. This guide to professional learning outlines a model of literature circles that I have refined and found successful over many years of teaching and learning. Most importantly, it honours the principles and intent of the original models of literature circles – small groups of students meeting to discuss books of their choice in engaged, authentic conversations guided by topics that interest them. My hope is that teachers will have a place to start, and naturally refine this model for literature circles as they learn and change from their experiences to find a model that suits them and their students.
Chapter 2: A Grounding

Literature Circles

Foundational Literature

Literature circles were first conceived spontaneously, and likely simultaneously, in classrooms in the early 1980’s. Noted in much of the literature, this instructional approach to teaching reading was credited to a group of students who, after finding several copies of the same book in their classroom, decided to read it and then met to talk about it. Born within the whole language era, two original models of this literature-based instructional strategy emerged in the professional literature in the late 1980’s. In the early 1990’s, another model was introduced which was intended as a ‘safe’ and ‘easy’ method, and thus more likely to encourage more teachers to try literature circles in the classroom. Since this time, what has evolved are variations and adaptations to the models based on teachers’ views of literature and learning. I use the term literature circles to define small-group, student-led book clubs where students engage in meaningful conversation about books they choose to read.

All three original models are grounded in common foundational ideas and theories. Each supports the view that children are, by nature, makers of meaning (Peterson & Eeds, 1990, 2007). They come to school already knowing about reading from their lived experiences (Short & Pierce, 1990). Children use this rich and diverse foundation of story to navigate making meaning in school (Heath, 1985). Central to the structure of literature circles is the reader responding to what is read in the process of making meaning (Daniels, 1994; Peterson & Eeds, 1990; Short & Pierce, 1990). This honours that there is no one ‘right’ interpretation of a text, only multiple interpretations depending on what the reader brings to the text, and therefore takes from the text –
Rosenblatt’s view of reading as a transactional process. Consistent with Vygotsky’s view of learning, at the heart of literature circles is the shared conversation around a common text to express interpretations and build deeper understandings. Scaffolding is built into the process of teaching and learning in literature circles, as teachers model the language of response to literature through a variety of means, preparing students to function at higher levels in their literature circle conversations. A key characteristic in all of the original models is independent reading of books chosen by students. Engagement in reading occurs when students have choice in what they read, and reading improves when students spend time in independent reading (Allington, 2006). Literature circles are grounded in the belief that learning occurs best within a community of learners (Daniels; Harste, Short & Burke, 1988; Peterson & Eeds, 1990). Indeed, for literature circles to be successful it requires a classroom environment that supports risk-taking, and acknowledges that all members of the classroom community contribute to constructing meaning. Establishing a community of learners starts with this view of teaching and learning, and ultimately is enacted through the teachers’ talk and patterns of discourse.

In reviewing these original models, what is uncovered is there is no one, “right” model of literature circles. While the foundational ideas are common, there exist different conceptions as to the purpose and place of literature circles in the realm of balanced reading in the language arts classroom, and in the role played by the teacher that impact how the models are enacted. Depending on teachers’ views of literature and learning, and the intended purpose of literature circles in their reading instruction, it is likely they will determine that one model suits their needs better than another. I use the term ‘balanced reading’ to define a framework for teaching reading based on what learners
need to gradually move from dependence to independence whereby centricity and responsibility shifts from the teacher to the students. Harste et al. (1988) introduced a model in which students intensively explore the meanings of books with others. Their goal is to bring literature and readers together to share responses, explore half-formed ideas, and revise meaning based on hearing others’ interpretations. These intense conversations are held after students finish reading the text, and topics of discussion are guided by student interest. The role of the teacher in the discussion evolves from director to participant. The purpose of this model is for students to learn the language of a literate conversation. Teacher support is geared towards helping students better prepare to bring their own thinking to the discussion, so they could eventually take over directing discussions. The scaffolding in this model is significant because it leads to students independently leading literate discussions. The issue is not so much about what role the teacher takes, but the question of how best to foster students’ abilities to initiate and sustain literate discussions.

Peterson and Eeds (1990) introduced a model stemming from a strong belief that story is an exploration and illumination of life. Students and teacher engage in intensive dialogue after reading, focusing on the conscious contemplation of literature. Dialogue moves from aesthetic interpretation to critical analysis and interpretation of literary elements guided by the teacher, whose role is to evoke thinking and focus students’ attention on those ideas laden with meaning. The purpose of this model is to foster enjoyment and interpretation of literature. Of significance in this model is the teacher-directed approach to guiding students into deep explorations of text. This model requires
teachers to be able to talk about books with great clarity and insight, and to understand deeply the literary elements to know what to highlight in the dialogue.

Daniels (1994), collaboratively with a group of teachers, introduced what he deemed a ‘safe’ and ‘easy’ model of literature circles with the hopes of encouraging more teachers to ‘join the (literature circle) club’. Notable in this model compared to the previous two mentioned is the inclusion of the “reading is thinking” research, recognizing that strategic reading and meaning making occur before, during, and after reading. Thus a major difference in his model is that readers meet during the course of reading the book to discuss the text. This adaptation is significant as it acknowledges the building of meaning as students read. In what could be seen as a response to the first model as to how students come to develop the ability to initiate and sustain discussion independently, Daniels developed student ‘roles’ based on cognitive thinking strategies. This temporary scaffolding structure was to help students have a purpose for reading and to help feed a student-led discussion on books. Different from the previous two models, the purpose of this model is for students to respond to books at the aesthetic level; explicit instruction of literary elements occurs at other times in the realm of balanced reading. Also very different from Peterson and Eeds’ (1990) model, the teacher’s role is that of facilitator; rotating among groups while they simultaneously meet, offering support as needed to keep the process running smoothly but not to “teach” interpretations of text. Central to Daniels’ model is the consideration of the role group dynamics plays in discussion groups, and the importance of building mutually developed norms for conversation. The importance of teaching discussion skills within literature circles is a larger focus in Daniels’ second book (2002a) and is mentioned in some of the more current research.
In many ways, Daniels achieved his goal of encouraging more teachers to try literature circles as the profession has seen a boom in the use of literature circles in the last 10 years, many of which are variations of this model (Daniels, 2002a). However, one of the challenges that emerged was that in some classrooms role sheets became a permanent fixture in the implementation. What resulted were conversations that were mechanical, artificial, and stilted. Daniels (2006) no longer advocates the use of role sheets in his model, but rather having kids ‘harvest’ their responses on sticky notes or in reading logs, and using these notes to feed discussions. I was one of those teachers who ‘joined the club’ as a result of Daniels’ (1994) original model, not because I preferred it over the others, but simply it was the first and only model I knew existed. As a new teacher, I faithfully followed his approach, and I agree it appeared ‘easy’ and ‘safe’ but perhaps deceptively so. Looking back, I see that I lacked the bigger picture of balanced reading so didn’t fully comprehend the implications of the choices I was making using this model. While I knew I loved the idea of small groups of students reading and talking about books of their choice, after my first implementation I knew there were aspects of the model I wanted to change. Like others, I found the role sheets generated contrived, inauthentic conversations, and that problems arose when students didn’t read the agreed upon pages or complete the role sheets. As I flitted between groups catching snippets of the student-led conversations, I was left without a deep sense of the students’ thinking and learning. Reflecting back on that first year, I realized the important things were that on the whole the kids loved literature circles, and that I gained a starting place from which to begin my journey with my own adaptations and changes for my own model.
More recently, Brownlie (2005) introduced a model adhering to the same foundational ideas and theories as the above three models. What is unique to her model is there are no limits on how much students read in preparation for a meeting, and meeting groups are fluid as students start and finish books at their own pace – elements of differentiation. The teacher models and students practice strategic thinking in preparation for talking about books. Students share aspects of the book that are significant to them, and together they interpret meanings. Group dynamics are addressed through generating criteria for being a sophisticated group participant, and through self-assessment of participation in discussions. The teacher’s role is that of participant, sharing his/her own thinking. At first I couldn’t imagine the flow of this model – students reading as much as they wanted and moving between groups at different times. However, my trust in this educator/author was enough to convince me to try. Now, this element of fluidity is a key feature in my model and I wouldn’t have it any other way. Having gained much more knowledge over the years about reading and thinking, I now had the background to understand how to explicitly model thinking about books. I built this practice into my reading instruction prior to literature circles. With ongoing practice my students were able to independently respond to texts. This drastically changed the quality of discussions to more sincere, engaged, authentic conversations, and is now central to my own model.

All four models meet a need in a balanced reading classroom, and fall at different places on the continuum of teacher/student-directed and intensive/extensive reading. What results is no ‘one way’ to do literature circles in the classroom but variations that fit the needs of teachers, their context, and their students. Peterson and Eeds’ (1990, 2007) model is teacher-directed with intensive reading. The model by Harste et al. (1988)
begins with teacher-directed instruction then shifts to student-directed participation, but still intense reading. Daniels’ (1994, 2002a) model is student-directed and moderately intense. Brownlie’s (2005) model is student-directed, moderately intense with more extensive reading. Scott (1994) suggests teachers take a responsive rather than a directive role, in which participant teachers are supporting students and enjoying their accomplishments. In this way we come to know our students better. Short, Kaufman, Kaser, Kahn, and Crawford (1999) examined ‘teacher talk’ in literature circles and identified how the role taken by teachers in the discussions influences student talk. Significant for teachers is that we understand how what we say impacts the conversation. In the end, there exist many models for literature circles, none of them pure, and none perfected. Like most educational innovations, they are in a constant state of refinement, restructuring, adaptation, and change.

**Current Research**

Little mention was made in the foundational literature about the selection of books for literature circles. An important feature noted in more current research is picking books that are related to the students’ lives and that capture their interests (Clarke & Holwadel, 2007; Clarke, 2007). Engaged students are more likely to have powerful and meaningful discussions because they are talking about issues that resonate with them (Clarke & Holwadel). Clarke suggests choosing books that address underlying issues that are presenting themselves in the classroom and using them as a way into dealing with these issues. Daniels (2002b) notes that teachers need to choose books that have the potential to foster rich discussions, with characters we can care about, and issues that are rooted in ethical or moral values.
Much has been written in more recent research that supports Daniels’ (1994) original focus on the role group dynamics play in literature circles. Teachers cannot expect students initially to have the discursive abilities to maintain a positive discussion, and students need opportunities to develop conversational skills (Clarke and Holwadel, 2007). Teachers also need to be aware of deeper layers of conversations that occur in literature circles that may serve to isolate or silence some members (Clarke, 2007). Daniels (2002a) emphasized the need to build on his original collaborative learning structures by including explicit instruction through mini-lessons, and students’ reflections on the ‘social skills’ used to engage in meaningful, collaborative peer-led discussions. To address the teaching of conversation skills, Clarke, and Clarke and Holwadel, found success using mini-lessons highlighting the skills they saw their students needing. Teacher modeling and scaffolding of conversation skills can be done outside of literature circles, or by taking on a ‘coaching’ role within the literature circle discussion, modeling and coaching students in using positive language practices (Clarke; Clarke & Holwadel; Pearson, 2010). Kong and Fitch (2002) suggest having previous students model effective conversations through the fishbowl strategy. Videotaping literature circles discussions and watching them together to debrief the sessions was found to be helpful in having students notice effective and ineffective interactions (Clarke; Clarke & Holwadel). From here, the ground rules for participating in discussions can be created. This heightened awareness of the need to teach students not only how to talk about books but how to have a collaborative discussion is significant because we cannot assume, as Daniels (2002a) points out, an “if I build it, they will come” notion. Increasingly we are teaching culturally and linguistically diverse learners, and we need to have a common
understanding of how to initiate and maintain a productive conversation. The roles of teacher as listener and observer are important in determining the needs of our students as a whole and as individuals. I have learned to be more responsive to situations, and more flexible in my role as participant in discussion groups in order to meet the needs of students.

Sometimes teachers fear using literature circles because students may become off topic or off task during their discussions, especially if the teacher is absent. Pearson (2010) found that while much of the student talk during literature circles was ‘cumulative’ talk – the function being primarily social and not cognitive – this sharing of anecdotes played an important function as students connected the book to their stories. So while it first appeared students were off topic and the book forgotten, they eventually brought in the book as it tied into their stories. Noteworthy here is that children may need this social talk time to arrive at more personal and fruitful comments about the text; just as the same sort of social conversation often precedes meaningful discussion in adult book clubs. Pearson also observed that students engaged in both formal (school) and informal (play) discourse in discussing the book. While it first appeared that students were off task or acting out, such performing voices actually served to act out the text and to bring it to life, contributing to a fuller appreciation of the text.

The expansion of the use of literature circles over the years has led to new insights and learning that aim to improve the structure of this instructional strategy, but not without some challenges. Daniels (2002a) notes one of the biggest problems that have plagued literature circles is what he refers to as “terminology drift”. In the sweep of this innovative structure, the term “literature circles” has been used to describe many different
reading activities that bare little resemblance to the features of the original models. While not claiming any pure model, Daniels has witnessed reading activities labelled as literature circles that oppose the very beliefs that literature circles were founded upon: round robin reading; the use of basal readers or text books; teachers directing the discussion with lists of questions. Daniels admits there are many variations on his original model that teachers have adapted to suit their style, grade, timetable, and students, that still honour the founding principles and intent: student choice of text; small temporary groups that meet to discuss topics of interest to them; open, natural conversations in which the students use notes to guide their reading and discussion, and the teachers serves as facilitator.

At a time when some teachers struggle with meeting the needs of diverse learners in the classroom, we are reassured that literature circles are a successful instructional strategy for inclusive classrooms. Blum, Lipsett, and Vocom (2002) found when students with special needs participated in literature circles they felt better able to understand literature, and it increased the perceptions of their own abilities as readers. When effectively implemented, literature circles honour the classroom as a community of learners where all students are valued as participants, and students perceive instruction as being the same for all individuals.

As we enter a time of online collaboration and discussion, Valenza (2008) offers the idea of moving literature circles to a blogging form to enlarge ‘the circle’ across classrooms and borders. This wider sphere has the potential to introduce dramatically different perspectives and understandings of texts. In more isolated communities, this
alternative to face-to-face discussion may be a viable option to engage students in meaningful conversations about books.

Summary
Reviewing the literature on literature circles was most enlightening to me, as I considered my own practice as a classroom teacher as well as my position working with teachers. As I reflect on the literature circle continuum of practice, an obvious insight to me was the variety of models that exist for literature circles, serving different purposes and places in a balanced reading classroom. It was interesting to reread some professional books with a more experienced lens. I found myself gaining a much deeper understanding than I acquired in my first read - a clear example of my learning in the zone of proximal development. As I read Peterson and Eeds (1990) I appreciated where this model would fit into reading instruction, and I was drawn to the idea of ‘shooting literary arrows’ into literate discussions with students. I also understand where Daniels’ (2002a) model fits in to the balanced reading classroom, and value the joy and the thinking initiated by students as they discuss topics and issues that matter to them. When it comes to meeting the diversity in the classroom, Brownlie’s (2005) structure is perhaps the strongest model. Whatever our choice, of utmost importance is our awareness that the decisions we are making effect the way our students ‘talk’ about books. We must remain cognizant of keeping a balance of teacher instruction and student participation and be responsive to the needs of our students in different situations at different times.

Teacher Professional Learning/Professional Development
Much research has been done in the area of teacher professional development and professional learning, and those of us in the field of staff development will have a vested
interest in this area if we are to keep pace with educational change. Fullan, Hill, and Crévola (2006) find the term ‘professional development’ to be too narrow a concept and use the term ‘professional learning’ as it implies focused, ongoing learning. They report a disconnect between teachers’ professional development experiences and day-to-day classroom experience. If the goal is to change instructional practices, teachers need extended opportunities for professional learning that are embedded in their daily work (Fullen et al.). We must use what we know about how teachers learn and what structures and features will facilitate shifting practice when planning professional learning. For my purposes, I will use the term “staff development” to include all opportunities for teachers to learn, as this fits with my role as “staff developer”. I will use the term “professional development” to include one-time, isolated experiences, and “professional learning” in the same as Fullen et al. describe above, as on-going learning embedded in practice.

Shulman and Shulman (2004) identified features of teacher learning as aspects of personal and professional development. They articulate that teachers begin the process of learning with a readiness to pursue a vision of teaching and learning. This vision may come from dissatisfaction in the status quo, an encounter that has put into question current practices, or from building on a known or comfortable practice (Short & Pierce, 1990). The challenge I see in a profession so often lived out behind closed doors, is that those encounters that could lead us to call into question our own practice may not penetrate the classroom walls. With vision, there must exist a willingness to enact the vision (Shulman & Shulman) or what Richardson (2003) refers to as “buy-in” among teachers if professional learning is to be effective. I firmly believe in the importance of teacher “buy-in” as I have had the experience of working with unwilling teachers with
little impact. To enact change, Shulman and Shulman assert that teachers need to have knowledge and understanding not only of what must be taught (knowledge of curriculum) but also of how to teach it (knowledge of pedagogy). Since pedagogy is in a constant state of change, I would argue that knowledge and understanding of pedagogy should be a focus in teacher professional learning. Beyond good practice, Shulman and Shulman stress the centrality of reflection by teachers – on their own and others’ practice. It is through the sharing of stories about teaching and learning that professional learning moves to a new place of questioning assumptions, brainstorming solutions, and affirming or changing practice (Short & Pierce).

Richardson (2003) asserts that teachers frequently experiment with new activities in the classroom then assess them on the basis of whether they “work” and match their beliefs about teaching and learning. She recommends that staff developers “…try to operate within this naturalistic sense of teacher change” (Richardson, 2000, p. 6). The goal is to determine the ways in which teachers make decisions to change, and then to support them when they do. Fullan et al. (2006) found that change in behaviour often precedes change in beliefs, and that having positive experiences in teaching are a motivator for change. This idea is reflected in my experience with literature circles. It was through trying that I discovered it was a practice that fit with my own beliefs and one that motivated me to change my practice.

A large body of research on teachers’ professional learning has provided some consistent guidelines for those conditions and features likely to lead to change in teachers’ practices. Richardson (2003) claims however, that what the research suggests is not commonly seen in the way staff development is delivered, citing the prominent model
for K-12 teachers as a short-term transmission model. Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, and Orphanos (2009) concur that the one-shot workshop, offered by most school systems, is not the most influential in changing practice. This information holds significant importance to me as I consider how to support teachers in their learning.

Summarizing the research on effective features of professional learning, Richardson (2003) begins with the notion of it being school-wide to be context specific and develop a school culture of improvement. Darling-Hammond et al. (2009) agree that when teachers in a school learn together the benefits include greater consistency, more willingness to share practices, and a greater likelihood of trying new ways of teaching. Effective staff development should be long-term with follow-up. Trying out new ideas in the classroom and reflecting on the results is a process that occurs over time. Darling-Hammond et al. state that this finding matches teachers’ views. Having a supportive administration is more likely to lead to changes in practice. When supported by school leaders, teachers feel their efforts to make change will not be called into question. Meister (2010) notes that some teachers rely more on the support of colleagues as school administrators may change more frequently. Having access to adequate funds for materials and substitute teachers is necessary for effective professional learning. Shulman and Shulman (2004) note the absence of adequate resources as a stumbling block to implementing new practices. Effective professional learning acknowledges teachers’ existing beliefs and practices. Short and Pierce (1990) suggest teachers make changes that fit in with what they already do, and fit with their beliefs about teaching and learning. Richardson notes making use of an outside facilitator, while not an essential feature, can be valuable in effective professional learning. Ertmer, Richardson, and
Cramer (2005) found that teachers perceived a critical characteristic of a coach or facilitator went beyond having knowledge of content. Interpersonal skills were deemed to be more important to first build a trusting relationship. Finally, and most extensively noted in the research, is the characteristic of *collegiality* and *collaboration*. Suggesting that human knowledge is constructed within the minds of individuals within a social context, constructivist theory is at the very heart of teaching. Indeed, Shulman and Shulman note this same theory of learning that applies to students, also applies to the learning process of teachers. This list solidifies that shifting teacher practice is system-wide; some elements are well within what I can provide as a staff developer, while others speak to issues outside of my role, but perhaps not beyond influence.

One form of professional learning that employs all of the above-mentioned characteristics is the inquiry approach. This approach, highlighted in much of the literature and grounded in constructivist theory, sees participants determining their individual or collective goals, experimenting with practices over time with support, and engaging in open and trusting dialogue with colleagues and outside facilitators with a focus on teaching and learning (Richardson, 2003; Shulman & Shulman, 2004; Ertmer et al., 2005). I have supported this type of learning over the past three years and have witnessed powerful change in teachers’ learning within some schools. While the inquiry approach is well suited for professional learning that has the goal of developing deeper understandings, and shifting teacher beliefs and practices, different formats may be well suited for other goals of professional development (Richardson).

Professional learning should involve creating learning communities in which teachers engage in meaningful activities, and collaborate with peers to co-construct
knowledge (Musanti & Pence, 2010). Musanti and Pence note however that collaboration can be challenging for some; those whose identities as teachers may be tied to independence, autonomy, and knowledge may find it difficult to identify as part of a collaborative group of teacher learners. When this challenge is overcome, the result can be a more powerful collective knowledge.

**Summary**

Reviewing the literature on teacher professional learning revealed valuable information to me as a staff developer. Significant to my learning was the importance of professional learning occurring over time, with support, and embedded in daily practice if we are to see lasting shifts in teacher practice; this argues for the putting aside of the one-time workshop model. Teachers’ readiness and willingness to change practice stemming from their own dissatisfaction (Shulman & Shulman, 2004) supports the insight that participation in professional learning should be voluntary if real change is to occur. The issues of teacher identity, noted by Musanti and Pence (2010), is a delicate matter and important to consider in ensuring professional learning opportunities acknowledge teachers’ existing beliefs and practices. Adhering to learning theory, professional learning most likely to lead to a shift in practice happens through collegial collaboration and conversation and thus should be built into models of staff development. The above features and conditions deserve attention and consideration when planning professional learning opportunities.
Chapter 3: Joining the Club

A Reflection

I learned of literature circles in my first year as a full-time Gr. 5 classroom teacher in a K-5 school. I recall feeling under-prepared to teach language arts, uncertain of my practices, and eager to converse with colleagues hoping to glean from their wisdom and experience. Reflecting back I had, in Shulman and Shulman’s (2004) terms, a readiness to pursue a vision for teaching and learning in language arts. I didn’t yet have a clear vision but I knew I wanted something different for my students and myself. A trusted friend, and teacher in a different district, told me about literature circles and recommended the professional book by Harvey Daniels, Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom (1994). I was excited at the prospect of this structure where kids choose books and meet to talk about topics they find important – it sounded so real and engaging! At that time, no other teachers in the school were doing literature circles, and the only other teacher of the same grade had an established style very different from mine. Within this context, I felt there was limited potential for collaboration and I would be learning on my own. My principal had heard about literature circles and was excited I was going to try this instructional practice in my classroom. This administrative support, as Richardson (2003) contends, added to my confidence in trying out a new practice. Being a new classroom teacher I did not feel my identity as a teacher was tied to a belief that I should have a deep understanding of curriculum and pedagogy at this point in my career. Perhaps it was, as Musanti and Pence (2010) suggest, my identity as a learner that left me open and willing to try new approaches leading me closer to my desired vision of teaching and learning. As I reflect on my beginnings, I
can’t help wonder how different it might have been if I’d been part of a collaborative teaching environment.

I read Daniels’ (1994) book and faithfully followed his model for setting up and ‘training’ students for literature circles. As a new teacher, I didn’t fully comprehend the big picture of balanced reading at that time so I didn’t question if there were other ‘ways’ to do literature circles. Daniels’ book clearly outlined for me ‘how to do literature circles’, and I took comfort in having a structure to follow. Just as he intended, his approach made it ‘easy’ and ‘safe’ for me, a new teacher, to ‘join the club’. Professional learning that includes knowing what to teach and how to teach it - knowledge of curriculum and knowledge of pedagogy – is necessary to enact change in practice (Shulman and Shulman, 2004). This book gave me both.

That year I began by ‘training’ my students as they eagerly practiced the different roles using the role sheets: Discussion Director, Connector, Illustrator, Word Wizard, and Summarizer (Daniels, 1994). They were genuinely excited to choose from the selection of books I presented. Clear to me now is that student engagement stems from having choice in learning. I gave little consideration in choosing books beyond basic suggested grade levels, age appropriate content, and availability - I simply went about finding multiple copies of whatever I could get my hands on. This was very different from how I choose books now; attending to students’ interests, issues, and needs is advocated in the current literature (Daniels, 2002b; Clarke, 2007; Clarke & Holwadel, 2007). Our first literature circle meeting saw groups of students scattered about the room – at desks, on the floor, in the cloakroom – meeting to share their role sheets. I flitted from group to group trying to get a flavour of the conversations the students were leading guided by
their roles. Those first conversations sounded somewhat contrived but I was sure they would improve given more practice. Like other teachers in the early stages of implementing literature circles (Burda, 2000), I spent much of my time rushing between groups so didn’t have a full sense of what any one group was talking about. I was frustrated, but nowhere near ready to give up. My vision was forming – I imagined a classroom in which groups of students have genuine conversations about books, and I trusted the potential this approach held.

Daniels (1994) believed it wasn’t necessary to have read all the books the students were reading in literature circles since teachers could learn about the book along with the students. During subsequent meetings that year, I found myself wanting to stay with one group instead of roaming so I could hear their conversation - their ideas and questions about the book. I came to realize that by not having read the books, I didn’t know what students were talking about, and whether they were truly constructing deeper meaning together. I knew for next time I needed to read all the books first.

Other problems became apparent along the way – students didn’t finish their assigned reading because the book was too challenging or they didn’t have time, role sheets were incomplete or forgotten, or students were absent on meeting day. I observed the impact this had on all students – not only on the quality of their conversations, but on them as a community of learners. Some felt frustrated and let down when peers weren’t prepared for the discussion, and I saw the defeat on the faces of those that for one reason or another unintentionally disappointed the others. It didn’t feel like I was building and nurturing community this way.
At the end of that first year, while I knew I wanted to change and adapt aspects of this model, I had a starting place from which to begin my own literature circles learning journey. Central to shifting practice (Shulman & Shulman, 2004), this process of reflecting on my implementation of literature circles led me to question certain elements of this model, and brainstorm possible solutions and changes for next time. As the findings of Fullen et al. (2006) and Richardson (2003) contend, having a positive experience in trying a new instructional strategy that matched my vision of teaching and learning was a motivator to change my practice.

Over the next three years I continued to reflect on and refine my practice on this same literature circle model; it was the only one I knew. I read all the student books, and I scheduled meetings on alternate days so I could be part of all the groups. This allowed students not meeting to be reading and completing responses to ensure they were prepared for their meeting day. These adaptations brought me closer to not only my vision of teaching and learning but also to my students. Through our discussions of books, I had a window into who they were as learners and as people. At this time I was still questioning and testing out my role in the literature circle groups. Depending on the dynamics of a given group my role ranged from director - calling on the students to share their role responses - to a facilitator of the discussion. Despite making some positive changes, there was still work to be done in moving discussions to reflect genuine and engaging literate conversations. I felt like I had reached a plateau with the roles and role sheets, and I couldn’t, as Daniels (2002a) reminds us, assume the ‘if I build it, they will come’ stance. I concluded that more practice with role sheets was not the answer to eventually turning discussions into authentic, engaged conversations where students were
genuinely constructing meaning together. This structure was too confined; it was holding back my students.

It wasn’t until I read Keene and Zimmerman’s *Mosaic of Thought* (1997) and Harvey and Goudvis’ *Strategies That Work* (2000) that I learned about the thinking strategies proficient readers use. I was awakened to how this thinking would fit in with my model of literature circles. Like other teachers transforming their understandings of literature circles (Burda, 2000), I began to understand the notion of scaffolding. I started using think-alouds during my read-alouds to explicitly model thinking strategies in use, then had students practice these strategies in conversations with others. I adapted my model of literature circles that year, and as Daniels (2006) now advocates, did away with the role sheets. My students were well on their way to being proficient in using the strategies as a way of thinking and responding to text, as well as capturing their thinking on sticky-notes and response journals. The transition to using this approach in literature circles was finally quite seamless. I delighted in seeing my students doing what proficient readers do – drawing on the strategy that made sense for them in their reading - (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000) not bound by some predetermined role. My students became so accustomed to sharing their thinking that what emerged in literature circle discussions was more authentic conversations about topics and issues that mattered to them. Students led discussions and I participated as an active listener who shared my thinking when it fit into their discussion. Unlike Peterson and Eeds’ (1990) model, I recognize now the literature circle model I adopted and adapted was student-centered. My teacher-directed instruction on thinking about and responding to texts occurred outside literature circle discussions, in the realm of a balanced reading classroom. While much happier with the
genuine conversations occurring in literature circles, I still struggled when students begged to read ahead of their groups’ agreed upon point. It felt wrong as a teacher who so fiercely wanted my students to enjoy reading to tell them not to read. I also felt the frustration of those readers struggling to keep up with their group. They needed more time.

Later that same year the district Literacy Advisor, a former colleague who I trusted and respected, invited me to attend a webcast meeting featuring Faye Brownlie talking about literature circles. A well-respected educator and presenter in our province, I had previously read and adopted some of her ideas and therefore I was excited to have the opportunity to learn more from her. Funds were available to cover the costs associated with me attending, an element Richardson (2003) found to be important in facilitating change in practice. As I sat among a room full of educators, I listened to Brownlie present her adapted model of literature circles but couldn’t quite grasp her description of a structure where students read varying amounts of text and moved between literature circle groups. There were conversations among our table group on the benefits of this model in meeting the diverse needs of students, and questions about the logistics of managing shifting groups of readers. These collegial conversations made me aware that I was not alone in my hesitations and questions. The convictions of others and the open dialogue toward a collective goal of engaging all readers drove our discussion and we actively sought to co-construct our knowledge of a new approach to literature circles. Brownlie, as an outside facilitator, was instrumental in challenging my thinking, leading to a change in my practice (Richardson). This day highlighted for me that collegial and collaborative discussions are at the heart of teaching, and are a very powerful component
in shifting teacher practice (Richardson). Still somewhat hesitant, I was none-the-less intrigued as I considered this model a possible solution to my uneasiness in telling kids not to read ahead, and having other readers struggling to stay caught up.

I read Brownlie’s book, *Grand Conversations and Thoughtful Responses* (2005) yet still couldn’t quite picture how her structure would unfold. To be honest, it sounded chaotic to me so I did have some reservations about trying this model. Perhaps my reservations were, as Musanti and Pense (2010) discovered, attached to my identity as now an experienced teacher – as one who has, or is supposed to have, knowledge. By putting myself in a position of learner was to suggest I didn’t have all the knowledge. Admittedly, I was not happy with the status quo in my classroom and recognized the need for a change; a condition highlighting a readiness for change (Shulman & Shulman, 2004). Looking back, I think my willingness to attempt a further shift in my practice stemmed from having the support of a trusted colleague, a practice introduced by a respected author, the collegial support I felt at the webcast meeting, and a feeling that I had nothing to lose and everything to gain.

At the start of the next school year, I began teaching reading comprehension strategies and how to talk about books through lots of explicit instruction, modeling, and student practice. My students and I used thinking strategies during our read-aloud, as we shared interpretations and constructed meaning together. The ‘say something’ strategy (Harste et al., 1988) outlined in Brownlie’s (2005) book became our invitation to discussion. Through extensive modeling and practice students not only became accustomed to talking about books, but we came to know each other in ways that may not have been possible if not for our talks about books. The read-aloud experience served to
build community in our classroom and became a touchstone for future conversations in literature circles (Burda, 2000).

When we began literature circles I told my students that I was trying a new approach to this strategy so we’d be on this learning journey together, and checking in regularly to see how we felt it was working. I did not come across anything in the literature of teacher professional learning that considers the role of the students as teachers introduce new instructional practices. Informing students of my intentions to try a new practice and inviting them to give feedback along the way seemed to give them a sense of sharing power in the classroom. They responded by taking their role very seriously and let me know freely how they felt this new model was unfolding. They made suggestions as to how we might keep track of books and adapt comprehension activities, and happily re-joined discussions on books they had finished. I believe they felt a heightened sense of mutual respect by being included, and really felt they contributed to my learning. Their collaboration in my learning process was invaluable to me.

As I implemented more changes to my model that year, I no longer had to worry about students’ readiness to talk authentically about books. I was confident in the work we had done together in laying the foundation to engage in meaningful literate conversations independently. For the first time, I chose literature circle books based on my students’ interests and needs, and even one title that spoke to a relevant issue occurring in class (Clarke & Holwadel, 2007). The books had engaging plots, characters that readers could identify with and care about, and they spoke to issues relevant to adolescents (Daniels, 2006). My students were keen to read the selection of books I presented, and weren’t too disappointed if they didn’t get their first choice since they
could move on to another book and group upon finishing one. That year my students read vast numbers of books, and much to my surprise, conversations flowed despite the fact that students were at different parts in the book. Instead, they learned another important discussion skill – how to “not spill the beans”. My fears around the fluidity of the groups proved unfounded; they ran so smoothly that I knew this adaptation would be a mainstay in my model. Like Day’s (2003) experience, I saw the few students who struggled with reading benefit from being able to read at their own pace, and be involved in extensive discussions with others whose level of understanding pushed them to construct deeper meanings than they would have on their own. The strong readers read as many books as they wanted, contributing their perspectives to many discussions. The feedback I got from my students was unanimous – they loved this model. For the first time, I addressed discussion skills (Brownlie, 2005; Daniels & Steineke, 2004) by teaching and reflecting on the following skills within the context of literature circles: initiating a conversation, building on others’ ideas, disagreeing politely, taking turns, and inviting others into the conversation. Without these skills, and knowledge of how to talk about books, students will struggle to enjoy the meaningful conversations that we so hope for them (Brownlie; Daniels, 2002a; Clarke & Holwadel). My students were very honest in their reflections about why a discussion was successful or not, and understood the value of these skills in carrying on meaningful conversations. For the first time, I co-constructed criteria with my students on what it means to be a ‘sophisticated’ group participant, what an effective discussion looks like, and what a powerful response sounds like (Brownlie). By building criteria, students were clear in what we were collectively aiming for in our literature circle discussions. We debriefed after their meetings, reflecting on their participation
against the established criteria. This was very effective in helping students take responsibility for their learning, and see why such behaviours are necessary to the success and enjoyment of the group.

Much has been written about the role of the teacher in literature circles. This role is crucial in determining the purpose and style of the discussion. It impacts who is talking during the meetings, about what, and who decides on what to discuss. The role I played this year was to participate in, but not lead, the discussion, and I modeled appropriate group behaviour to support students in learning these behaviours. Just like the students, I came to the literature circle meetings prepared to ‘say something’. This shift from facilitator to participant not only increased my enjoyment in literature circles but also my learning about my students. The role of participant teachers is to support students and enjoy their accomplishments (Scott, 1994), and that is exactly how I felt. When teachers played the role of facilitator – asking questions to expand or clarify thinking, restating important comments, maintaining conversations, or challenging a comment – students engaged in far less of this kind of talk than they did in groups without a teacher present. When teachers played a participant role – sharing connections, thoughts and opinions as comments more than questions – it served to push students’ thinking to the same levels as when teachers played the role of facilitator (Short et al., 1999). I think it is freeing to consider that we don’t need to take on the role of facilitator for our students to reach the level of thinking we want and hope for them; the same can be accomplished through sharing our own thinking. The need for teachers to take a responsive role rather than a directive one means being comfortable with silence and getting side-tracked but ultimately trusting that students will talk about what is important to them and relate the
literature to their own lives (Scott, Pearson, 2010). I experienced uncomfortable moments of silence and resisted the temptation to speak in an attempt to show my students that it was not up to me to move the conversation forward. Over time, they became more comfortable with silence and less reliant on me to revive a conversation. I also experienced students engaging in social talk, and I struggled with how to respond. Perhaps I should let go of the need for students to focus the conversation on the book and trust that eventually the students’ talk will come back to the book, just as Pearson (2010) found, when it ties into their stories and becomes relevant to their conversation. Heath (1985) wisely reminds us that children learn patterns of social interaction within a cultural context that they in turn bring to school and apply as cognitive strategies in approaching reading events. Students learn how thoughtful readers discuss and respond to books in ways that build understanding together, and come to define themselves as certain kinds of readers through these events. It is through our interactions with students we either provide or deny them access to talk during literary events. I wanted literature circles to be a safe place for all voices to be heard and valued.

I disagree with Daniels’ (2002a) claim that if teachers need to be a part of every group they likely have a need to maintain control in the class. I was comfortable giving up control of the discussion but I wanted to hear the genuine thinking that was transpiring and building within groups. If not, I felt I was missing out not only on valuable information about my students’ learning but on the pure joy of having meaningful conversations about books. I listened in awe as my students shared opinions, challenged each other’s thinking, built on each other’s ideas, asked others to support their thinking, and ultimately constructed understanding together. My students were truly engaged in
meaningful, literate discussions. Through these discussion we not only gain windows into our students’ thinking about books, but also into their lives and who they are as people; and equally important, they into ours (Simpson, 1995). If we want to build community in the classroom, we have to let our students get to know us just as they are learning about each other (Burda, 2000).

Perhaps a time will come when I feel the need to rethink my presence in the discussion groups considering Short et al. (1999) found no qualitative difference between issues the students discussed when teachers were absent as compared to when they were present. I believe that getting our students to this level of discussion independently can only result from the effective demonstrations teachers do that model how to think and talk about books, and from giving students ample time to practice talking about books. For now, I will relish the time spent in literate conversations with students.

**My Current Model of Literature Circles**

My learning and teaching of literature circles has indeed been a long-term professional learning endeavour of trying out new ideas in the classroom, reflecting on the results, and refining along the way to a model that was consistent with my vision of teaching and learning. It has occurred on a developmental continuum; from my beginning beliefs that ‘there is only one way to do literature circles and I have to do them the right way’, to ‘I’ll refine a few things and try some new ideas’, and finally to ‘this is what works in my classroom now and I am constantly learning and changing how I do things’ (Campbell Hill, Schlick Noe, & Johnson, 2004).
My Beliefs

My current model adheres to the same foundational ideas and theories evident in the original models by Harste, et al. (1988), Peterson and Eeds (1990), and Daniels (1994). Of utmost importance to me is student choice of text, since we know it not only engages students, but it’s what real readers do. I choose a selection of books that I know will resonate with my students’ interests, and titles that will be accessible to the diversity of readers. I honour that all readers make sense of what they read by what they bring to and take from the text, and it is through this process of responding and interpreting that meaning is constructed. I celebrate the philosophy of the Harste, et al. model of intensively exploring the meanings of books as readers gather to share responses, explore half-formed ideas, and revise meanings based on hearing others’ interpretations. I support a model where scaffolding is central to the teaching and learning of how to talk about books as we support students to independently lead meaningful discussions. We know that voluminous reading improves students’ reading (Allington, 2006), and provides opportunities to take on new roles and learn about the world through personal engagement in literature. Brownlie’s (2005) model, which places no limits on how much students read, makes this possible. While in the end, my evolved model is closely aligned with Brownlie’s approach to literature circles of extensive reading in fluid groups and teacher as participant, I have been influenced by the ideas of others, and continue to make changes to suit my style, my context, and my students. One of my absolute greatest joys in teaching is listening to my students’ thinking about books, and in the process getting to know them as people.
My Structures

Orienting the Students

The foundations for what my students will need to independently talk about books are laid at the beginning of the year. I use think-alouds and extensive modeling to demonstrate the thinking strategies and how to talk about books, using picture books, read-alouds, and a class novel. These experiences provide students with opportunities to practice the thinking strategies, learn how to harvest their thinking on sticky notes and double-entry response journals, and build confidence in talking about books. The stage is then set for students to apply these ideas independently in literature circles.

I teach students to use the ‘say something’ strategy to share their thinking in literature circle discussions. The goal is to encourage a natural conversation driven by what is meaningful to them. This approach supports a variety of student responses that can serve to initiate and sustain the literature circle discussion.

Choosing Books and Forming Groups

The quality of books is critical to the success of the literature circles. I choose books that reflect and respect the range of students in my class, ensuring there will be at least one book in the collection that will be a good fit for each and every student. I choose topics and genres that I know will interest my students. More recently I try to build book choices either around a central theme (such as courage, displacement, slavery, or humanity), or around an essential question such as: how do our decisions impact our lives, and the lives of others? Books must have compelling plots, characters the students can connect with and care about, and relevant issues to discuss. I have 5-6 copies of 6 different titles for a class of 30 students. This ensures there are always a few books available when a student finishes one.
To introduce and create enthusiasm for the books I do a book talk by sharing an overview of plot, and reading an excerpt from the book so students get a feel for the tone and language. I inform students of the page count and the amount of white space on a page so students get a feel for how long this book might take to read; it is also a respectful way of indicating ‘the easier book’ without overtly stating it. Students write down their top three picks, and knowing that groups are fluid, choose a book they are personally interested in. I create the initial groups trying to give students their first choice if possible. Even if students didn’t get their first choice of book to start, they know they will have other opportunities. When book talks are done thoughtfully, and ‘easier’ books are shared respectfully, I find most students are very good at choosing a title that is right for them. I appreciate Brownlie’s (2005) suggestion in talking about the easier book being a good pick if students are busy with other activities in their lives and need a book they will not feel frustrated about how long it takes them to read. If strong readers pick easy books, they will read them quickly and move on to another; adding market value to the books that may be perceived as ‘easy’.

Organization and Management

Organization and management of materials, schedules, and students needs to be highly structured for literature circles to run smoothly. I keep sign-out sheets listing the titles of books in a visible place in the classroom. Students are responsible for writing down their name next to the title they are currently reading, and cross it out when they return for another book. We can see at a glance who is reading what, who has read what, and who may need more encouragement to keep going. I have a designated spot for available books from which to choose when one is returned. The schedule of literature
circle meetings is posted in a highly visible place so no matter what book students are reading they know what day they are responsible to meet. I stick to this schedule diligently, taking into account holidays or non-instructional days, so students know what to expect. When the flexibility of fluid literature circle groups is paired with a systematic structure that is organized, it provides a sense of security for teacher and students.

A round of literature circles using this model can last between 4-6 weeks depending on the age of students and schedule of the reading classes. I let the students know the end date well in advance, so they are aware of when they need to finish reading.

Group Discussions
Discussion groups meet one at a time for about 20-25 minutes, usually twice a week. For older students, once a week may fit timetable schedules better. In order to have a meaningful discussion I try for at least four, but no more than six, members. If fewer than four students are currently reading a title, I invite others back who have finished reading the book to participate in the discussion. I have found that students are always happy to rejoin a group for conversation.

A small but appreciated aspect of literature circle meetings – modelled after adult book clubs - are the drinks and snacks I provide for students. With food, drinks, and conversation, we feel we are mirroring the authentic experience of engaging in conversation about a book as it happens in the real world.

Students come to the literature circle discussion prepared to share a passage that struck them in some way – to which they had a response - and ‘say something’ about it. Every person in the group has the opportunity to respond to each person’s thinking. It is important that all voices are included in the discussion and the conversation flows in a
natural and authentic way. Since students will be at different points in the book at any given time, I encourage them to tease and tantalize others with their conversations but not ‘spill the beans’. My role is to participate in, not facilitate, the discussion and model being a sophisticated group participant. I am listening to students’ thinking and discussion skills, making mental notes if there may be any that need reinforcing with mini-lessons. When one group is meeting, all other students are reading independently and/or working on response journals.

I remind students that group discussions will move them to new understandings and they will ‘leave smarter than when they came’. A new element I am considering is having students add to their written responses after the group discussion, noting new interpretations and understandings or changes in their thinking.

Response Journals
Students keep a Response Journal, using loose-leaf paper in a duo-tang, to record their thinking and responses to the books they read. I use a simple double-entry journal format: the heading on the left reads, ‘Event/Quote from text’, and the right side is, ‘My Response’. I have moved away from telling students how many responses they need to do each day/week encouraging them to respond when it is appropriate in their reading. In general, I have found students to be quite prolific in responding to what they read, so having this element of personal control has worked well. Some students told me they dislike having to stop the flow of reading to record their thinking in the response journal so we added the option of using sticky notes to harvest their thinking and sticking them into the place in the book that struck them. At a later time, they move the sticky note from the book and put it onto the double-entry journal under ‘My Response’, and add the
event from the text on the left side. This adjustment has made it more likely these students will respond and honours their desire to be in the book.

Another type of response journal I use is a ‘dialogue journal’ (Brownlie, 2005). Here, students work in pairs reading the same book. They write a letter to their partner in response to the book then exchange journals. The other reads and writes back in response.

**Mini-Lessons**

Mini-lesson topics do not come from an established list, but from my observations of students engaged in literature circle discussions and their response journals. Mini-lessons occur as part of responsive teaching, not on a prescribed sequence. We teach students what they need to know next (Atwell, 1998). These short, 5-10 minute mini-lessons start with me sharing with students what I’ve noticed. Sometimes I am directly presenting an idea or strategy, and other times the mini-lesson will be collaborative - involving the students in generating solutions to an issue. In the early stages of literature circles, the focus of the mini-lessons are likely to be more procedural, and later focus on elements of effective book-talk. Learning is naturally scaffolded as teachers provide direct instruction through mini-lessons, and students have opportunities to practice the skill or strategy in subsequent literature circle discussions.

**Comprehension Activities**

Through journal responses and discussions, understanding remains a central focus of literature circles. With comprehension activities I look at aspects of story structure such as setting, character, plot, and theme as determined by the curriculum. I give students managed choices in ways they can show their understanding in these areas.
Students choose which book(s) they use to complete the activities, but it should be a book they have completed or have almost completed.

Celebration
At the end of the literature circle cycle, students choose a way to celebrate their reading. I have moved away from having students do a large project at the end because I felt it took away from the pleasure and joy of their extensive reading. Instead the purpose is to celebrate and share, and provide a sense of closure to literature circles. When literature circles are done thematically, this can be a tying together of all the books to the central theme. Again, I offer a managed choice for individuals, partners, or groups to celebrate. This could include a class survey of students’ favourite book in literature circles, book groups sharing how their book tied to the central theme, or sharing the books we read with other classes.

Finally, I ask students to write me a letter reflecting on their experience with literature circles (Brownlie, 2005). These letters provide me with insights as to what is going well, and ideas and advice for changes. I value students’ feedback, and use it to reflect on the effect my decisions have on the lives of my students and refine my practice.

Assessment
Literature circles leave a rich trail of evidence of students’ reading, learning, and thinking, and we want to ensure we capture this information in a meaningful way. This is an area I have refined greatly over the years, and have come up with the following assessment pieces with which I feel comfortable, for now.

As a class we create criteria together on the following: what makes an effective group discussion, what makes a sophisticated group participant, and what makes a
powerful response. The criteria for group participants and effective discussions are created either just prior to starting our literature circles or after the first meeting. We then revisit it after we’ve had a few meetings to ensure it reflects what we believe is important. These criteria are posted in the classroom and given to each student. The class also constructs criteria for the comprehension activities. When students are involved in this process there is buy-in and ownership, and their effort and engagement increase.

After each discussion students reflect on their participation as sophisticated group members according to our class generated criteria, and complete a self-assessment. I have recently added having students identify a goal to work towards for the next meeting.

During the course of our literature circles, I collect students’ Response Journals and give descriptive feedback based on our criteria. At the end of literature circles, I ask students to choose what they believe to be their best three or four responses and I evaluate these. Comprehension activities are assessed based on criteria created in class.

As a participant in literature circle discussions, I am watching and listening to students’ thinking about the books, and their discussion skills. I bring a copy of the grade-appropriate BC Performance Standard Worksheet (2000) to many meetings and make notes during the discussion on students’ comprehension and discussion skills. My students are used to me recording their ideas as I explain that I cannot possibly remember all their profound thinking and need to write it down. This variety of assessment tools provides me with what I believe is rich evidence of my students’ learning.

**Summary**

Literature circles are an engaging and powerful learning strategy bringing readers together to share interpretations of literature through meaningful conversations. There
remains no one right way - one recipe - for implementing literature circles. Rather, it is a practice that unfolds while being grounded in the foundational ideas and theories as well as one’s own vision of teaching and learning. My model for teaching literature circles has been an evolution of learning over time through my own reading, teaching, and experiences. One certainty remains - my own practice in literature circles will keep evolving as I continue to learn from others, reflect on my practice, and face new students.
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Professional Learning Series Guide: Literature Circles in the Middle Years

By Laura Lancaster
2011
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Literature Circles in the Intermediate/Middle School Classroom

Introduction

Literature circles are a powerful learning strategy engaging all students in reading and building understanding through conversations with others. There is no one right way to do literature circles. The approach to literature circles used in this professional learning series is one that evolved over time through my review of the literature and professional learning experiences. Although I provide a model for teaching literature circles, it is not intended to be a recipe - followed step by step - but rather a description to use as a foundation for teaching and learning literature circles. It is my hope that other teachers can use this model as a starting place for their own learning, and refine it to meet the needs of their own personal style, students, and school context.

There are different models of literature circles all of which are grounded in common foundational ideas and theories. The current research on literature circles supports promising practices that honour the principles and intent upon which literature circles were created:

- Children are naturally makers of meaning
- Readers respond to text in the process of making meaning
- Learning is socially constructed
- Teacher scaffolding is vital in students’ learning to talk about books
- Students read independently and have choice in text

Also of critical importance are the conditions and features most likely to lead to change in teacher practice. The literature review on teacher professional learning suggests long-term collaborative professional learning that is embedded in daily practice to be the most effective in changing teachers’ practices. This guide to a professional learning series on literature circles is based on many of these principles of effective staff development. While it is created in the context of the school district in which I work, it is my hope that other schools and school districts can use this guide as a template and modify it to suit their environment.

To give a context for teaching and learning literature circles, I relived my own story of learning and teaching literature circles over the past 10 years. It was in this process that I considered my own journey of professional learning of literature circles in relation to the ideas found in the research literature. This guide was created from what I gleaned out of the literature review and my own experiences with teaching and learning literature circles.

Design of the Professional Learning Series

The structure of this professional learning series is consistent with the findings that the one-shot workshop is not the most influential model in changing teacher practice (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2009; Richardson, 2003). Thus, it has been designed as a learning series to take place over 6 months, facilitated by a school or district literacy coordinator, with ongoing follow-up support from colleagues and the facilitator. Having access to funds to release teachers and cover materials supports effective professional learning (Richardson; Shulman & Shulman, 2004). It is recommended that funds be made
available to release teachers for the three afternoon sessions, and a professional book on literature circles be given to each school group.

Sessions are designed to employ the following features found to be most effective in changing teachers’ practice (Ertmer et al., 2005; Richardson, 2003; Short & Pierce, 1990; Shulman & Shulman, 2004): to build on teachers’ existing knowledge; include knowledge of curriculum and pedagogy; professional learning embedded in daily practice as teachers experiment with the practice of literature circles; learning over time, and with support; opportunities for engaged and open dialogue on the teaching of literature circles so understanding is constructed together; and teachers’ reflecting on their practice.

Inviting the Participants

It is suggested that teams of interested teachers from elementary and/or middle schools be invited to participate in the professional learning series. The benefits from teachers in a school learning together include: an increased willingness to share practices, a greater likelihood of trying new ways of teaching, and having the support of colleagues (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Richardson, 2003). Interested participants should have an interest in working collaboratively and be willing to commit to all sessions.

Implementation Schedule

This professional learning series is designed to take place over a 6-month period, ideally beginning in mid-September and running until the end of February. It is acknowledged that if literature circles are to be successful, it is necessary to invest time and preparation to move students gradually toward independence in thinking and responding to literature. The following implementation schedule is suggested:

- Session 1: mid-September (afternoon)
- Session 2: end of September (afternoon)
- Session 3: early December (afternoon)
- Session 4: mid-late January (after-school)
- Session 5: mid-February (after-school)

All three afternoon sessions are designed to take place prior to starting literature circles in the classroom. It is suggested that the first two sessions occur early in the school year to introduce teachers to literature circles, and give them the foundational understanding necessary to implement literature circles in January. Teachers then have the first months of the school year to provide scaffolded instruction on the thinking skills necessary to talk about books, as well as get to know their students as readers so the selection of books reflects and respects the needs and interests of all students. The third afternoon session is designed to occur shortly before launching into literature circles as it describes the structures and routines of literature circles, and introducing these to students. Following this schedule, literature circles are ready to be implemented after the winter break, giving teachers time to read their selected books.

The after-school sessions are designed to take place during the time literature circles are being implemented in the classrooms. These sessions will serve to collaboratively support, clarify, and problem-solve issues as they arise in teachers’ implementation of literature circles.
Professional Learning Series Components

1. Three afternoon sessions: (2.5 hours)
   - Session 1: What are Literature Circles?
   - Session 2: Laying the Foundations for Literature Circles
   - Session 3: Off and Running: Introducing Literature Circles to Students

2. Two after school sessions: (1.5 hours)
   - Sessions 4 and 5: These sessions will be guided by the issues, questions, and concerns raised by participants as they reflect on the implementation of this practice.

3. Ongoing support from the facilitator in the way of demonstration lessons, co-planning, co-teaching, or dialogue, are available as requested.

Format of Sessions

Each session in the series is designed using the following outline:

- Objective(s): articulates the goal of each session
- Materials: lists materials that are needed by both facilitator and participants
- Activate/Connect: serves to access prior knowledge of participants
- Acquire/Process: outlines new material to be processed in the session
- Apply/Transform: serves to apply or personalize the new understandings
- Wrap-Up: provides closure to the session and includes what participants need to do to prepare for the next session.
- Notes: provides a place for the facilitator to record reflections on the session or ideas for next time

A time frame is included for each session, and is meant to serve as a guide for the facilitator. These are suggested time frames only and should be adapted to meet the needs of the participant group.

Participant and facilitator handouts are included in this guide.
Key Components of this Literature Circle Model

- A variety of books sets: 5-6 titles with 5-6 copies of each, meeting the range of students’ needs and interests; students choose from the collection of books
- Students read as much as they want and respond in journals to the books they read
- Students meet in discussion groups, scheduled twice a week, to talk about the book they are currently reading
- Students come to the discussion prepared to share a passage from the book and ‘say something’ about the passage. Conversation is driven by what students deem to be important issues. The discussion lasts about 20-25 minutes.
- One group meets at a time; other students are reading and responding in journals
- Teacher plays a participant role in the discussion; sharing thinking, but not guiding the discussion
- Mini-lessons are scheduled as needed, based on issues as they arise
- As students complete a novel, they return it to the collection and choose another book. They will now join the discussion group for the new book at the next scheduled meeting.
- Students complete comprehension activities based on a finished novel of their choice
- A celebration is held at the end of the 4-6 week cycle to acknowledge and share the titles that were read

There are areas where teachers may adjust this model to fit their style, students, and context. Of importance will be discussing how teachers see this approach fitting into their balanced reading classroom, what purpose they wish it to accomplish, and what suits their needs and style. The topic of the teacher’s role in literature circles warrants conversation, as both the roles of facilitator and participant have merit in helping students grow as thinkers. The role teachers take will depend on where on the continuum they intend literature circles to fit into their balanced reading classroom - more teacher-directed or student-directed - and on the needs of their students. An important issue in working with teachers will be building an awareness that whatever role they choose to take in literature circles, they understand how that will effect the groups’ discussion.

Professional Resources

The following professional books are recommended as resources for further learning on literature circles.

Session 1: What are Literature Circles?

**Objective:**

1. To develop an understanding of literature circles and the foundational ideas supporting literature circles.

**Materials:**

Facilitator needs:

- Selection of literature circle novel sets (5-6 copies per title) suitable for grade level of teachers (as many books as there are teachers)
- Binder with dividers for each teacher (for handouts)
- Sticky notes
- Chart paper (some prepared ahead with headings)
- Markers
- Coiled notebooks - 1 for each teacher (for reflective journal)
- Participant handout (include 2 copies of double-entry journal)

**Activate/Connect:** 20 minutes

**Think-Pair-Share activity**

If you’ve tried literature circles before…

- What’s going well?  
- What needs work?

If you haven’t tried literature circles before…

- What questions do you have?  
- What concerns/problems could you foresee?

Teachers record on p. 1 of handout, discuss with partner, and share out in large group. Facilitator records on chart paper, and keep these thoughts in mind to address throughout the sessions.

**Acquire/Process:** 80 minutes

**Experience literature circles**

- **Facilitator:** Do book talk for each novel, modeling how to introduce books to a class. Use guidelines on p. 8 in handout for book talk. Teachers can make notes.
- Teachers choose a book to be their literature circle book throughout the professional learning series
- Teachers read Ch. 1 of book independently, harvesting their thinking on sticky-notes as they read. This may be any type of personal response: a connection, a question, an opinion, an inference, a reaction, a confusion, etc.
• When book groups are finished reading have them share their responses within their group; engage in an open discussion of where the book took them.

Say: These are literature circles: Small, temporary, peer-led discussion groups whose members have chosen the same book. While reading, members record their thinking and responses. Groups meet to talk about what was interesting for them in the spirit of a genuine conversation.

• Each literature circle group shares a sample of their conversation – something that got the discussion going, sparked a disagreement, or got people engaged in the conversation.

• In their book groups, teachers reflect back on the conversations to consider:
  1. What kinds of discussion skills were being used?
  2. What thinking skills were used to make sense of the book and talk about it? (make notes on p. 2 handout)

• Take up responses from 2 questions in the large group and record ideas on chart paper under headings:
  1. Characteristics of a successful group discussion
  2. Way to talk about books to build understanding (facilitator name the thinking skills as they arise)

Say: Notice the sophisticated discussion skills and thinking skills evident in literature circles. These are the kinds of skills required for our students to be successful in literature circles, and as such are the ones we need to teach them. This list will also lend itself to possible mini-lesson topics as you see needed throughout literature circles.

Discuss any challenges or questions as a result of participating in the discussion. These can be issues to address along the way in the sessions.

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**Break (10 minutes)**

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**Apply/Personalize:** 30 minutes

**Foundational ideas/theories behind literature circles**

**Silent Graffiti:** Post chart paper, with the following headings, around the room. Ask teachers to wander around and add their thoughts as to how each of these ideas was played out in their literature circle discussion:
  1. People are makers of meaning
  2. Readers respond to text in the process of making meaning
  3. Learning is socially constructed
  4. Scaffolding
  5. Independent reading

**Discuss** the purpose of each of the foundational ideas referring to ideas generated by participants. Reinforce these foundational principles in future conversations. (p. 3 handout)
Discuss key components of this model of literature circles (p. 4 handout) and where this model of literature circles fits in a balanced reading classroom (p. 5 handout)

- Share notion that there exist variations of literature circles with relation to purpose and role of teacher that fit at different places on the continuum but still adhere to the above principles.
- Have teachers consider where literature circles might fit into balanced reading in their classroom. Record these thoughts and other questions into the reflection journal.

Wrap-Up: 10 minutes

Exit Slip: 3-2-1  
Participants complete exit slip before they leave:

3 affirmations/new learnings/a-ha’s
2 things I’m still wondering
1 question or issue I want to make sure we address next session

* Facilitator to address questions at next session

For Next Time:
Say: Use the coiled notebook to journal your thoughts and questions over the next few months as we learn about literature circles.

1. Record your thoughts and/or questions as they arise
2. Think about the model of a balanced reading classroom and your own teaching, and consider where your vision of literature circles would fit in.
3. Read more of your literature circle book and respond with sticky notes.

Notes:
Session 2: Laying the Foundation for Literature Circles

2.5 hours
(post for participants)

Objectives:

1. To develop an understanding of how to teach thinking strategies in making sense of text
2. To develop an understanding of how to respond to a text in writing
3. To use the Say Something strategy in facilitating literature circle discussion

Materials:

Facilitator needs:
- Copies of Placemat (one for every 4 people). Can be enlarged 11x17
- Novel and/or picture books for modeling and practice
- Document camera or overhead machine
- Chart paper and markers
- Copy of double-entry journal for demonstration (overhead or paper)

Participants need:
- Literature circle novel
- Binder with handouts

Activate/Connect:

20 minutes

Placemat activity:
1. In groups of 4, teachers record own thoughts/questions from reflection journal on placemat.
2. Discuss in groups. In center of placemat, record the groups’ 3 most pressing thoughts/questions.
3. Share in large group. Keep these in mind to address throughout next sessions.

Acquire/Process:

90 minutes

1. Using the Gradual Release of Responsibility model to teach how to think about and respond in writing to text before starting literature circles

Say and discuss: If students are going to share their thinking and responses to the text, we need to teach them how to think about texts and respond to texts. Students need explicit instruction in each of the thinking strategies that readers use, and plenty of time to practice prior to beginning literature circles. Ideally, this instruction should start right in September. Many teachers model individual strategies using picture books or short pieces of text, and then use a whole class novel for the purpose of continuing to model thinking, and having students practice thinking, responding, and talking about a text. This lays the foundation - providing opportunities for guided
practice with the kinds of thinking that students will later apply more independently in their literature circle groups. See handout p. 6

**Facilitator models:**
- Read aloud a part of text and model, using a think-aloud, one thinking strategy (this could be a connection, question, inference, a prediction, an evaluation, an analysis, a synthesis, or an emotional response – any of the thinking strategies readers use to make sense of text). Record thinking using a double entry-journal format on overhead or under document camera to show how to respond in writing to text (sticky notes is another way).

**Teachers practice:**
- Read another picture book or excerpt from a novel, and have teachers practice the modeled strategy and record their response on the double-entry journal (p. 15 handout). Duplicate copy can be used as BLM.
- Teachers share out their responses in small groups.
- Facilitator notices and names the kinds of thinking/responses made.

2. **Teaching the Say Something strategy**

**Say:** This strategy will facilitate the literature circles discussion. Each student will be responsible for being prepared to ‘say something’ about their book in every meeting. This can be taught now or just prior to beginning literature circles.

**Facilitator models:**
- Read aloud a short piece of text and model the ‘say something’ strategy by sharing your thinking about a piece of the text.

**Teachers practice:**
- In groups of 5, do a ‘whip around’ – each person in the group says something about the text or connects to others’ thinking. Facilitator makes explicit the kind of thinking that is being expressed/demonstrated.
  - Important to notice the different kinds of thinking happening, and how our own thinking can change and grow from what others say.
  - Emphasize there is no one right ‘answer’ or response.

3. **Generate Criteria for Effective Group Discussions**

**Ask:** What behaviours made for an effective group discussion in your group?
- Groups share in their small groups, then in larger group. (record on p. 7 of handout)
- Facilitator records on chart paper and post in the room.

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**Break (10 minutes)**
4. Choosing Books for literature circles:

Discuss: Things to consider in choosing books for your students (p. 8 handout)
  a. Know your students:
    - Know students’ interests so you can choose topics and genres they will like. This can be done using reading interest surveys or interviews
    - Be familiar with students’ reading ‘ability’ to ensure you have a book accessible for every reader in your class. This can be done through a reading assessment.
  b. Availability: you will need 5-6 copies of each title
  c. Consider a theme for book sets: Journeys, Perseverance, Displacement, Importance of family, Courage, Friendship, etc. Check out the BCTELA wiki with lists of themes and suggested titles (website on p. 8 handout)

Guest: If possible, bring in district (or school) librarian to share collections of literature circle books available in the school or school district.

* When you’ve decided on which books to use with your class, start reading!

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**Apply/Transform:**

25 minutes

Fishbowl Activity:
Half of the book groups practice the ‘say something’ strategy with their literature circle novel while one of the other groups listens and observes each discussion (10 minutes).
Instruct those observing to be listening and watching for 2 things:
  i. what kind of thinking they hear
  ii. what behaviours of effective group discussion they see
Remind participants that all are at different places in the book so they can tantalize but not ‘spill the beans’. Discuss what ‘tantalize’ could sound like in a discussion.

Ask observers to comment on:
  a. What did you notice about the kind of talk in the group?
  b. Reflect on criteria of effective group discussion – what did you notice?
  Ask: Do we want to change/add anything to the criteria list?

Ask all: Are there any mini-lessons that you think would benefit your group?
Give examples of some possible mini-lessons. These can be discussion skills (ex. inviting people into the conversation, disagreeing politely) or thinking strategies (ex. supporting thinking with evidence from text, inferring from author clues)

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**Wrap Up:**

5 minutes

Exit Slip:
  1 thing I feel confident in starting
  1 thing I would like more information on or more support in
  * note those wanting support, and follow up in person
Homework:
1. Begin explicitly teaching the thinking strategies using gradual release model.
2. Finish your literature circle book and come prepared to ‘say something’ at the next session.
3. Continue recording your thoughts, insights, ideas, or questions in reflection journal.

Notes:
Session 3: On Your Way: Introducing Literature Circles to Students

Objectives:

1. To develop an understanding of the components needed to introduce kids to literature circles
2. To develop an understanding of how to organize literature circles
3. To develop an understanding of assessment and evaluation in literature circles

Materials:

Facilitator needs:
✓ Chart paper

Participants need:
✓ Literature circle novel
✓ Binder with handouts

Activate/Connect: 30 minutes

Think-Pair-Share activity:

Acquire/Process: 75 minutes

Components of Literature Circles

Discuss the following 9 components in large group:

1. Introducing kids to literature circles
   • Describe what it is – relate it to adult book clubs
     a. self-select books
     b. read at your own pace and respond using sticky notes or double-entry journal
     c. meet regularly to discuss books using the ‘say something’ strategy
     d. choose another book when you finish reading, and join discussion group for new book
     e. success of groups depends on participation in reading and thinking

Apply/Transform: Teachers create their own literature circle description/introduction they will use with their class (p. 9 in handout)

• Teach the Say Something strategy using a short piece of text or class novel (if this has not been done prior to this time) (p. 9 handout)
• **Create criteria for effective group discussions** (keep posted in class)
  This can be done prior to starting literature circles or after the first meeting or two. Then it should be reviewed after the next few meetings to have groups reflect on how they are doing based on the criteria.

2. **Book talks** (participants can take notes on p. 8 in handout)
Reflect on session 1 when facilitator did book talks with participant books.
  - Overview of plot/characters, suggest what kind of reader might like this book
  - Page count, and show size of font and white space
  - Read excerpt to give sense of tone and language
  - Be enthusiastic!
Students will write their top 3 choices on a piece of paper and turn into teacher. Teacher will create the initial groups based on students’ choices.

**Apply/Transform:** Teachers practice in A/B partners giving a book talk on the book they are currently reading in this literature circle.

**Discuss:** What if… students choose a book that is too easy/too hard?

3. **Keeping Track** (suggestion for how to set this up is on p. 10 in handout)
  1. Who’s reading what?
  2. Meeting Schedule

**Apply/Transform:** Teachers draft schedules that will work in their classroom

4. **Reader Response**
**Discuss** ways students can record their thinking using sticky notes, double-entry journals, dialogue journals, or other suggestions from group. (p. 11 handout)

**Apply/Transform:** Teachers consider how they will have their students respond.

5. **Meeting time!**
**Discuss:**
  - One group meets at a time; others are reading and responding
  - Students share a passage and ‘say something’; others respond to the say something; move onto next person. After all have shared their ‘say something’, continue with open discussion.
  - Students can tease, but can’t ‘spill the beans’
  - Teacher participates and models group behaviour
  - Consider providing drinks and a small snack!
**Goal:** to have students engage in meaningful conversations about their books

**Discuss:** **Creating criteria for a ‘sophisticated group participant’**
This can be done before or after the first meeting or two and reflected upon after each meeting with students self-assessing their contribution.
6. What’s everybody else doing?
- Reading
- Writing in response journals, or dialogue journals (build criteria with class)
  Working on comprehension activities that have been introduced

7. Comprehension Activities
Say: Comprehension is the ultimate focus of literature circles. After students have had time reading, thinking, responding, and talking, introduce an activity that focuses on an aspect of the story structure (character, setting, plot, theme, etc.). Offer students different modes of showing what they know. Students complete these on the book of their choice (not on each book they have read). We will be sharing ideas for comprehension activities at the next session.

8. Assessment and Evaluation
Discuss:
- Self-assessment as a member of discussion group
- Teacher assessment during group discussion – oral language and reading outcomes (example of performance standard worksheet from BC IRP, p. 12 handout)
- Journal responses: give descriptive feedback along the way as formative assessment (based on co-constructed criteria) to guide students in making powerful responses. Students pick their best 3-4 responses for evaluation against criteria as summative assessment.
- Comprehension activities – evaluate against criteria
- Other ideas?

9. The role of the teacher in literature circles
Discuss: There is no one right role for the teacher to play (ex. facilitator, director, participant) in literature circles – rather it is a matter of purpose and style that dictates this personal decision. The important thing to note is that whatever role we play in these groups will affect the groups’ discussion. In this model, the teacher plays the role of participant, contributing his/her thinking to the conversation.

Break (10 minutes)

Apply/Transform: 30 minutes

1. Criteria for a sophisticated group participant:
Teachers generate list of criteria describing the expectations of participants in contributing to a meaningful, engaging, literate conversation. (p. 7 handout)
Facilitator records criteria on chart paper.

2. Literature circle discussion
Teachers engage in their final literature circle discussion, using the ‘say something’ strategy then self-assess themselves against the criteria for a sophisticated group participant.
Wrap-Up:  
5 minutes

Homework:
1. Come prepared to share comprehension activity ideas for aspects of story.
2. Continue to record in reflection journal.

Notes:
Session 4: Follow-up and Support

Objectives:

1. To share experiences with literature circles
2. To collaboratively support colleagues in their practice.
3. To generate ideas for comprehension activities in literature circles

Materials:

Facilitator needs:
- ✓ 2 pieces chart paper with headings: What’s working? What’s not? (one set for every group of 4)
- ✓ 5 pieces of chart paper with headings: character, setting, plot, theme, other
- ✓ markers

Participants need:
- ✓ Any suggestions to share for comprehension activities
- ✓ Binder

Activate/Connect: 15 minutes

Small group discussion: (post papers around room when finished)
In groups of 4 discuss and record on chart paper:
- What’s working in literature circles?
- What’s not working in literature circles?

Acquire/Process: 40 minutes

1. Take up issues from above discussion
The format of this discussion can be flexible depending on the needs of the group and the issues that come up. Either large group discussion to address what’s working and what’s not working, or breaking into small group discussion to focus on different issues. Get feedback from participants as to what best suits their needs.

2. Comprehension Activities
Café: 20 minutes
Have one piece of chart paper on each of 5 tables with one heading on each paper: character, setting, plot, theme, other. Teachers form into 5 groups and move from table to table discussing possible activities for each list. Ideas are recorded/drawn on the paper.
Apply/Transform: 15 minutes

Gallery Walk
Hang the 5 papers up around the room.
Teachers wander around recording ideas they might like to use. (Record in handout p. 13)
Or, facilitator could create master list of these ideas and send out to participants.

Wrap-Up:

Homework:
Continue recording reflections in journal.
Consider:
- what aspects of literature circles you would do the same next time
- what aspects do you want to change/do differently next time

Notes:
Session 5: Follow-up and Celebrate

1.5 hours

Objectives:

1. To share successes and identify areas to refine in teaching literature circles
2. To collaborate on ideas to culminate the literature circle unit

Materials:
Participants need:
- Reflection journal
- Binder

Activate/Connect: 15 minutes

A/B Partner talk (A talks - B listens and paraphrases; vice versa)
Teachers share with partner how literature circles are unfolding in their classroom
1. What I’d do the same next time
2. What I need to refine/what I’d do differently next time

Acquire/Process: 50 minutes

Group Discussion:

1. Successes and Refinements to teachers’ models of literature circles
   a) Successes: Partner A shares out some successes discussed in partnership
   b) Refinements: Partner B shares out some aspects the pair noted need refining, and whole group offers support/suggestions for ways to refine model

2. Literature circle culminating activity – a time to celebrate!
   • Brainstorm possible student activities to celebrate the end of literature circles.
   • Students write a letter to you reflecting on their experience in literature circles.

Apply/Transform: 20 minutes

Teachers record their ideas regarding:
1. What aspects of their literature circles model they will keep the same, and ideas for what they will do differently next time (p. 14 handout)
2. Culminating activity to use in their classroom. (p. 13 handout)

Wrap-Up: 5 minutes

Request for Feedback on Series:
Participants respond on paper:
1. What worked well for you in this professional learning series?
2. What suggestions could you make to improve the learning series?
Literature Circles in the Middle Years

By Laura Lancaster

2011
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If you’ve tried literature circles...</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>What’s going well?</strong></td>
<td><strong>What needs work?</strong></td>
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<th>If you’ve not tried literature circles...</th>
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<td><strong>What do you wonder?</strong></td>
<td><strong>What concerns or questions do you have?</strong></td>
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</table>
**Literature Circles:**

Small, peer-led discussion groups whose members have chosen to read the same book. While reading, members record their thinking and responses, and contribute their thinking and ideas to the upcoming discussion. Everyone comes to the group with thinking to share.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discussion Skills</th>
<th>Thinking Skills</th>
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</tbody>
</table>
Foundational Principles of Literature Circles

1. **People are makers of meaning:**
   Children are, by nature, makers of meaning (Peterson & Eeds, 1990, 2007). They come to school already knowing about reading from their lived experiences (Short & Pierce, 1990). Children use this rich and diverse foundation of story to navigate making meaning in school (Heath, 1985).

2. **Reader Response to text:**
   Central to the structure of literature circles is the reader responding to what is read in the process of making meaning (Daniels, 1994; Peterson & Eeds, 1990; Short & Pierce, 1990). This honors that there is no one 'right' interpretation of a text, only multiple interpretations depending on what the reader brings to the text, and therefore takes from the text - Rosenblatt’s view of reading as a transactional process.

3. **Learning is socially constructed:**
   Consistent with Vygotsky’s view of learning, at the heart of literature circles is the shared conversation around a common text to express interpretations and build deeper understanding. Construction of knowledge is situated in the social context of the literature circle discussion. Through these conversations meaning is negotiated, helping each individual clarify and solidify his/her own understanding of the text.

4. **Scaffolding**
   Scaffolding is built into the process of teaching and learning in literature circles, as teachers model the language of response to literature through a variety of means, preparing students to function at higher levels in their literature circle conversations.

5. **Independent reading**
   A key characteristic in all original models of this strategy is independent reading of books chosen by students. Engagement in reading occurs when students have choice in what they read, and reading improves when students spend time in independent reading.
Key Components of Literature Circle Model:

- A collection of books: 5-6 titles with 5-6 copies of each, meeting the needs and interests of each student; students choose from the collection the books they want to read
- Students read as much as they want and respond in journals to the books they read
- Students meet in discussion groups, scheduled twice a week, to talk about the book they are currently reading
- Students come to the discussion prepared to share a passage from the book and ‘say something’ about the passage. Conversation is driven by what students deem to be important issues. The discussion lasts about 20-25 minutes.
- One group meets at a time; other students are reading and responding in journal format
- Teacher plays a participant role in the discussion; sharing thinking, but not guiding the discussion
- Mini-lessons are scheduled as needed prior to meetings, based on issues as they arise
- As students complete a novel, they return it to the collection and choose another book. They will now join the discussion group for that book at the next scheduled meeting.
- Students complete comprehension activities based on a finished novel of their choice
- A celebration is held at the end of the 4-6 week cycle to acknowledge and share the titles that were read
Literature Circles in the Balanced Reading Classroom

Teacher Responsibility    Teacher and Student Responsibility    Student Responsibility

Explicit Demonstrations   Modelled Reading   Think Aloud   Read Aloud

Guided Practice

Shared Reading

Guided Reading

Independent Practice

Independent Reading

Literature Circles
Gradual Release of Responsibility Model

Gradual Release of Responsibility

Teacher Modelling
• explains
• demonstrates
• thinks aloud

Guided Practice
• teacher and students practise
• teacher scaffolds the students’ attempts and gives feedback
  • students share their thinking with each other

Independent Practice
• students apply strategy on their own
• students receive feedback from teacher and other students

Application of Strategy
• students apply strategy to new situations

Taken from:
Building Criteria Together

Criteria for an effective group discussion:

Criteria for a sophisticated group participant:
Choosing and Presenting Books

**Things to keep in mind in choosing books:**

Student Interests

Range of student needs

Theme sets

Availability

For theme set ideas check out the BCTELA website link:

http://bctela.pbworks.com/w/page/31617467/Thematic-Text-Set-Ideas

**Introduce the Literature Circle collection with a book talk:**

Overview of the plot

# pages, font size, white space

Read excerpt for sense of tone and language
Getting Started with Literature Circles

My introduction of literature circles to my students:

Say Something strategy:

This strategy provides students with opportunities to construct meaning and monitor their understanding. It establishes a very clear and simple method for helping students make clear connections to text. Students come prepared each meeting to ‘say something’ about a passage in the text that struck them in some way.
### Keeping Track

**Who’s Reading What?** (one sheet for each book)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book Title</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Copy 1</td>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>Grace</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copy 2</td>
<td>Jesse</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copy 3</td>
<td>Graham</td>
<td>Chris</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copy 4</td>
<td>Crystal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Copy 5</td>
<td>Luke</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Literature Circle Meeting Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monday</th>
<th>Tuesday</th>
<th>Wednesday</th>
<th>Thursday</th>
<th>Friday</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How to Steal a Dog</td>
<td>Crazy Man</td>
<td>Libertad</td>
<td>Breadwinner</td>
<td>Listening for Lions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breadwinner</td>
<td>Listening for Lions</td>
<td>How to Steal a Dog</td>
<td>Crazy Man</td>
<td>Libertad</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Keep these posted in the classroom
Responding to Texts

A few options for ways to respond to text:

1. Sticky notes

2. Double-entry journal

3. Dialogue journal
**Worksheet: Grade 7 Reading Literature**

This worksheet includes the criteria for the “Fully Meets Expectation” column of the Grade 7 Reading Literature Quick Scale. Teachers can use the third column to plan instruction or assignments, tailor or elaborate the criteria for specific activities or students, adapt the criteria for other grades/times of year, record observations, or give to students for self-evaluation.

**Snapshot:** The student is able to read generally straightforward fiction and poetry and complete assigned tasks. Work is accurate and complete.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>“Fully Meets Expectations” Criteria (March-April)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strategies</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>check understanding</td>
<td>checks for understanding; adjusts strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>word skills</td>
<td>uses a variety of strategies for new words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>knowledge of genres</td>
<td>uses knowledge of familiar genres to predict or confirm meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>figurative language</td>
<td>recognizes and tries to interpret figurative language</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Comprehension</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>story elements</td>
<td>describes story elements in own words; explains some relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>predictions</td>
<td>makes logical predictions and inferences; when asked, can provide specific evidence</td>
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<tr>
<td>inferences</td>
<td>identifies relevant details in responses</td>
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<tr>
<td>details</td>
<td>interprets obvious themes</td>
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<tr>
<td>theme</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Response and Analysis</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>connections to experiences and other selections</td>
<td>makes and supports logical connections to self or other selections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reactions</td>
<td>offers reactions and opinions with some support</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Taken from: [www.bced.gov.bc.ca/perf_stands/reading.htm](http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/perf_stands/reading.htm)
Comprehension Activities

Culminating Activities
My reflections on literature circles

Successes:

Thoughts for next time:
Double-entry Journal

Title of Book: _________________________   Name: ______________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event/Quote from text</th>
<th>My Thinking/Response</th>
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Dialogue Journal

Title of Book: __________________________ Name: ______________

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Exit Slip: Session 1:

3 affirmations/new learnings/a-ha’s:
   1.
   2.
   3.

2 things I’m still wondering:
   1.
   2.

1 question or issue I want to make sure we address next session:

makt
Exit Slip: Session 2

1 thing I feel confident in starting

1 thing I would like more information on or more support in
Feedback on Literature Circles Professional Learning Series

1. What worked well for you in this professional learning series?

2. What suggestions could you make to improve the learning series?

Thank you!