Literature Circles That *Engage* Middle & High School Students

Victor J. Moeller • Marc V. Moeller

An Eye On Education Book

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Victor J. Moeller and Marc V. Moeller

LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2007 by Eye On Education

Published 2013 by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxfordshire OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor and Francis Group, an informa business

First issued in hardback 2015

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Moeller, Victor J., 1937-
Literature circles that engage middle and high school students / Victor J. Moeller and Marc V. Moeller.
p.cm.
Includes bibliographical references.

1. Group reading--United States. 2. Book clubs (Discussion groups)--United States. 3. Literature--Study and teaching (Middle school)--United States. 4. Literature--Study and teaching (Secondary)--United States. 5. Student-centered learning--United States. I. Moeller, Marc V., 1970- II. Title.
LC6631.M64 2007
428.4071'2--dc22
2007019395

ISBN 978-1-138-13777-6 (hbk)
ISBN 978-1-59667-062-4 (pbk)

Publisher's Note
The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of this book but points out that some imperfections from the original may be apparent.

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Acknowledgments

Harvey Daniels deserves enormous credit for developing and spreading literature circles as a most effective method of getting kids hooked on books. We have relied largely on his two seminal books: *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom* (1994) and its sequel, *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups* (2002).

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PREFACE

"Learning is not a spectator sport."

- Teachers talk too much.
- Telling a student to think is like telling a student to fly.
- There can be no learning without discipline.
- The school that fails to teach thinking fails in everything.
- The student, not the teacher, is the primary agent of learning.
- Nothing is more daunting for a teacher than to get a student to think.
- Teaching is not chiefly about passing out information.
- The best kind of discipline is to engage students in engrossing activities.
- If thinking were easy, there would be more of it.
- The role of the teacher is to uncover the question that an answer hides.
- Thoughtful teachers create thoughtful students.
- Thinking is a skill that has to be practiced daily like playing the piano.
- Authentic learning begins when students are challenged with real questions—problems about meaning that demand solutions.
- Students asking students real questions leads to life-long learning.

Dear Colleague,

If you agree with most, or at least some of these statements, you have found kindred spirits. As we shake your hand and get a chair for you, let us explain briefly how this book will help you become a better teacher. Everything in this book is based on the assumption that students, not teachers, are the primary agents in learning. The corollary is that authentic learning is active learning. The consequence is that students become responsible for their own learning.

This book introduces you to a method—student-centered, collaborative learning—Literature Circles. Like their predecessor and complement, Great Book Groups, they have common, immediate goals of developing independent, reflective, and critical thinking and increasing student understanding and enjoyment of literature. Both methods also share the ultimate goal of

enabling students to become life-long readers, and as a result, life-long learners.

The readings in this book are grouped around five themes or basic questions: (1) Who are your real friends? (DiCamillo, *Winn-Dixie,* and Neugeboren, "Luther"). (2) When do you need family most? (Updike, "Separating" and Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*). (3) How important is a brother, a sister, or a girlfriend in your life? (Carson McCullers, "Sucker," Jean Stafford, "Bad Characters," William Faulkner, "Two Soldiers," and Leo Tolstoy, "Two Brothers." (4) How do true leaders inspire followers while false leaders deceive theirs? (Orwell, *Animal Farm* and C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*), and (5) Is technology as much a curse as a blessing? (Asimov, *Robbie* and Bradbury, "The Veldt").

Finally, whenever available, we use film versions of novels, stories, and above all plays, to make them more accessible to today's students who are so visually conditioned. Since a film is itself the interpretation of the screen writer, this book explains how to bring some of these stories to life through comparison-contrast discussion and writing. Together, may we continue to help our students educate their imaginations. Through active and close reading, and viewing film with a critical mind, may we also enable them to become life-long learners.

Sincerely,

Victor and Marc Moeller

1

The What, Why, and How of Literature Circles

"Here in the Midwest, our closely knit team of teachers has been developing one version of literature circles for almost fifteen years.… Do we think our model is better? Certainly not. We are genuinely impressed by the diverse ways that other teachers around the country have created and supported literature discussion groups." (Daniels, 2002)

The first time I saw Harvey Daniels speak was in a large conference room in Wheaton, Illinois. His discussion centered of the nature of reading and how it should develop a sense of the human condition. The teachers I remember most are those who had the ability and courage to tap into the things that really move us: love, relationships, fears, pain, hopes, and dreams. Some teachers, perhaps subconsciously, seem to have been taught to restrict, ignore, or dismiss, the human element in their classrooms. I agree strongly with Daniels's position on the relationship between reading and the human spirit, "We've asked kids to bottle up their responses, and in doing so we have blocked the pathway that leads upward from responding to analyzing and evaluating" (Daniels, 1994, p. 9). With mock humor and irony, Daniels correctly pointed out that presently, "traditional school reading programs are virtually designed to ensure that kids never voluntarily pick up a book once they graduate" (p. 11.)

My father and I regard ourselves among those teachers who have followed the 12 principles of Literature Circles for several years but have made their own refinements and innovations. Literature Circles and Great Book Groups have so much in common that some teachers regard them as a prelude to Great Book Groups while others see them as complementary and still others regard them as an alternative method of engaging all students, *whatever their ability*, in authentic, active learning. However, all teachers agree that both

methods, although distinctly different, have common immediate goals: to develop independent and critical thinking and to increase student understanding and enjoyment of literature. Both methods also share the goal of enabling students to become lifelong readers, and as a result, lifelong learners.

TWELVE PRINCIPLES

Two key concepts associated with Literature Circles are independent reading and collaborative learning which were first developed by Becky Abraham Searle. Today, her idea like Harvey Daniels's, is being developed and adapted with great enthusiasm throughout the country. So what are the characteristics of a Literature Circle? Here is our version of the Twelve Principles that determine and guide these small-group discussions.

- **First**, students choose their own reading.
- **Second**, small, temporary groups (six to eight students) are formed based on book choice.
- **Third**, different groups read different books.
- **Fourth**, groups meet for discussion on a regular, predictable schedule.
- **Fifth**, group members use written notes to guide both their reading and discussion.
- **Sixth,** discussion questions come from the students, not teachers or textbooks.
- **Seventh,** group meetings strive to become open, *natural* conversations about books.
- **Eighth**, students take on a rotating assortment of role tasks.
- **Ninth,** the teacher does not lead or participate in group discussions, but acts as a facilitator and observer.
- **Tenth**, evaluation is by teacher observation and student self-evaluation.
- **Eleventh,** a spirit of fun about reading pervades the room.
- **Twelfth,** when books are finished, readers share with their classmates and then new groups form around new reading choices.

Several of these principles need some elaboration. On the **first** principle of letting children choose their own reading, some veteran English teachers may gasp. However, I am not old enough to gasp but agree with Daniels's contention that "you absolutely can not fall in love with a book that someone stuffs down your throat" (Daniels, 1994, p. 19). In my classroom, students are allowed to choose from the books that we have available or are easily obtain-

able and meet in groups of six to eight with those who have chosen the same book.

The **second** principle, that groups form around book choice, is also vital. I want to group kids the way they would naturally group themselves--out of a common interest. I also realize that I may start off the class with every student picking one book to read for themselves on their own with a regularly scheduled Friday for sustained silent reading, just to get them into the mode of reading for pleasure on their own. Later, I get kids into Literature Circles with a limited list of books from which they can choose and want to read in a group setting. While there is an initial challenge in letting kids choosing their own books and groups, this difficulty can soon be overcome by trial-and-error and common sense.

The **third** principle, allowing kids to choose their books is important for two reasons: it gives them the opportunity to assign reading to themselves as adults do. By giving students the opportunity and practice of setting up their own readings they take ownership. With practice and repetition it may continue even after they leave school. Second, choice is an integral part of literate behavior. Being forced to read too often results in not reading at all—even when one has the freedom to do so. On occasion, the entire class may read and discuss the same book, short story, or play. In this situation, the class is divided into three or four groups of six to eight students.

The **fourth** principle is to have discussions on a regular predictable schedule. As Daniels states, "literature circles require a consistent down payment of time for training, but once they are installed in your portfolio of strategies, they pay big dividends in the reading program all year long" (p. 21). At times, my students meet in Literature Circles weekly, biweekly, or monthly.

The **fifth** principle that kids use written notes to guide both their reading and discussion is essential for the success of the program. By using role sheets (explanation to follow), students have time to respond to the reading before discussion to be able to bring something specific to discussion. Instead of having students fill in correct phrases or answers in workbooks, Literature Circles allow students to reflect and write down their responses *before* discussion. In this way they become genuinely active readers. In addition to preparing students for discussion, notes gathered from these role-playing sheets also serve as a staging area of ideas in the book that can be used by the group for a follow-up project that summarizes main ideas and themes in creative ways: book review, advertising posters, a "missing chapter," or converting parts into readers theater. As a result, students often interest other students in their book.

Principle **six** that discussion questions come from the students, not teachers or textbooks is the life-blood of this method of learning. Indeed, this may be the most important feature of all: "After all, if kids never practice digging the big ideas out of texts themselves and always have teachers doing it for them, how can they ever achieve literary and intellectual independence?" (p. 23). This condition should not be confused with permissiveness or letting kids do

whatever they want. When kids are given the opportunity *and* the challenge (thinking *is* difficult) to ask what is really bothering them, they begin to ask *real* questions—those that they have no answer to at all or those that evoke several answers but none of which entirely satisfy. Only real questions lead to an increase in understanding and comprehension. Can we expect students to write good prepared questions spontaneously? Not in our experience. Indeed, some teachers have given up on Literature Circles because their students keep writing factual, trivial, incoherent, or generic questions. (Are they not but imitating the kinds of questions that have been so familiar to them in so much previous reading instruction?)

To ensure productive discussions, teachers must teach mini-lessons on: (1) The difference between factual, interpretive, and evaluation questions. (2) How to formulate good, prepared questions during prediscussion that are *clear, specific, and capable of sustained discussion* because they have multiple implications. (3) How to ask good, spontaneous, follow-up questions for clarification ("Roger, what did you mean by ____?), substantiation, ("Jennifer, what in the story backs up your idea?"), and more opinion ("Mary, do you agree with John that ____?). Hence, the coleaders role is to begin discussion with prepared questions and then to develop answers by asking spontaneous follow-ups to move discussion along and to keep it focused on the story.

Principle **seven**, that discussions strive to be open, natural conversations about books, does not mean put-downs, petty comments, bickering or intentional digressions are acceptable. Student coleaders must be taught to deal with rude behavior and to avoid digressions to keep the focus on the book or story. After all, the purpose of discussion, as in Great Book Groups, is to increase understanding and enjoyment of the reading.

Principle **eight**, that students play a rotating assortment of role tasks provides the structure for students to be free to examine their own responses. Since a goal of this kind of discussion is to develop individual responsibility, students must clearly understand the varied roles or tasks that they will assume. These roles should be structured enough so the student is aware of what he or she is to be doing but not so structured as to have a specific outcome in mind. Open-endedness is crucial for lasting results. Daniels stresses that the roles rotate so each student has an opportunity to approach the books from different angles giving them chances to internalize the various perspectives offered by each role. Incidentally, he also advises that once all the students virtually have all of the different roles mastered or memorized that they be phased out and lead into using solely their personal response logs (p. 25.) However, the coleaders' role to prepare and lead good interpretive questions cannot be phased out.

Principle **nine**, that the teacher serves as a "facilitator and observer," sounds like a cliché but not for Daniels. In this setting, the teacher's role is not didactic, to dispense the "correct" interpretation or to correct answers, but to organize, manage, and to handle the logistics. This involves collecting sets of good

books, helping groups form, visiting and observing meetings, conferring with kids or groups who struggle, orchestrating sharing sessions, keeping records, making assessment notes, and collecting more books for them to read (p. 26.)

Principle **ten**, evaluation both by teacher observation and student self-evaluation, implies that "covering material," teaching specific "subskills," or "being sure that they get it" (that is, the "correct" interpretation) are all beside the point. According to Daniels, "Literature circles necessitate high order assessment of kids working at the whole thing, the complete, put-together outcome—which, in this case, is joining in a thoughtful small-group conversation about literature" (p. 27). Here authentic assessment by the teacher is through postdiscussion critiques (when the teacher points out what was done well and why and what needs improvement and how to do it), kid watching, narrative observational logs, performance assessment, checklists, student conferences, group interviews, video/audio taping and collecting materials produced in the end of the book group project. Equally important, students are responsible for writing a personal assessment of their own role(s) in the group, record keeping and written summaries and/or resolutions to the discussion questions in brief one-page essays.

Principle **eleven,** that a spirit of playfulness and fun pervade the room, may be a red flag to some principals but not to me. I know the things I learned the most from were almost universally the most fun. In my seventh grade social studies class I was very much involved in the various projects and competitions that made learning fun. In these literature circles I want to create a sense that what they are doing is enjoyable. The fun parts are there. They get to choose the books, thereby choosing the groups. They get to choose roles that are varied and temporary. They get to talk with their friends about what they are reading. They get to design their own "cool" end of the book project that makes the book come alive for them. And then they get to change the book and start all over again.

The **twelfth** principle bears repeating. New groups form around new reading material. There will be a constant mixing in the classroom with different combinations of children being thrown together with each new book choice. This, in effect, may break up groups that have become quite comfortable with each other but I think it is in the best interest of the class to shuffle the groups for developing important social skills and ultimately building a sense of community. Although some hail Literature Circles as a means of detracking, our experience has been that ability grouping is as acceptable as heterogeneous grouping. The issue ought not be that one kind of grouping is better than another but rather accepting that some students function better in one kind of group than another *depending on that group's choice of book.* For example, some students can handle the subtleties of a story like John Updike's "Separating," while others would be mystified. On the other hand, some students may find a story like *Because of Winn-Dixie* not much of a challenge because its meaning is pretty transparent. But what can be done when students choose a book that is

too hard or too easy for them? Daniels has two suggestions: the teacher has a private reading conference with the student to select another book or to provide the help (an aide, peer helper, or parent to read parts aloud or even getting the book on tape if possible) necessary for the student to achieve enough understanding to be able to function in his or her group (p. 183).

THE FUNCTION OF ROLE SHEETS IN DISCUSSION

For many teachers who have implemented Literature Circles, five key roles are *required* for success: Discussion Coleaders, Characters Captain, Passage Master, Wordsmith, and a Connector. The Movie Critic's role is optional, of course, depending on the availability of a film version of the story and teacher choice. To illustrate the importance and function of the first five roles, I spend 2 days modeling each task on a short selection (for example, Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken" or a superb one-page story by William Spencer, "Bethgelert") that the entire class reads to make sure students understand what they will be asked to do in their own groups (pp. 153-157).

The job of the **Discussion Coleaders** is to develop a list of 10 questions for group discussion about the section of the book that has been read prior to their meeting. It is vital that the teacher explains, illustrates, and tests student's understanding about the difference between the three kinds of questions: factual, interpretive, and evaluation. Unless the Discussion Coleaders understanding that they are being asked to write and lead **interpretive** questions, there can be *no increase* in understanding of the reading. Discussion dead-ends when factual questions are raised since they have but one correct answer. Questions of evaluation, those based on personal experience or values, are raised by The Connector, not the Discussion Coleaders.

We have also discovered that coleaders are preferable to a single leader because two students provide more brain power to write good prepared questions, more listening power to ask related spontaneous follow-ups, and more attention power to invite everyone to participate (more or less equally) by calling on them by name and by keeping track on a seating chart. Most importantly, *coleaders ask only questions during discussion.* They do not comment on or judge group responses to avoid turning discussion into an argument or a debate.

The **Characters Captain** lists the major characters in the story, gives a brief description of each one's personality, and explains his or her relationship to the other characters in the story.

The job of the **Passage Master** is to locate two or three key passages of the text that the person thinks the group would like to hear read aloud. The idea here is to help people remember some interesting, powerful, funny, puzzling or important section or sections of the text. The Passage Master's role also

involves reading the passage aloud to the group, explaining why it was chosen, and what the group should look for related to it as the reading progresses (p. 78.)

Each group should also have a **Wordsmith** who selects in advance several especially important words that appeared in the reading. These words may be puzzling or unfamiliar, or familiar words that stand out because they are often repeated, used in an unusual way, or are key to the meaning of the text. For example, in Jack Schaefer's classic Western, *Shane*, the word "man" appears 122 times. In nearly every context, it means more than male.

The Connector's role is to find connections between the book the group is reading and the world outside. This means connecting the reading to their own lives, to happenings at school or in the community, to similar events at other times and places, or to other people or problems that the connector is reminded of (p. 80).

Finally, **The Movie Critic's** (sometime) role is to develop a list of at least five important differences between the movie and the original story. The discussion here focuses on whether these changes improve or distort the author's story. In short, would the author agree with these changes? If so, why so? If not, why not?

For teachers who first introduce their students to Literature Circles, a common concern is logistical. For example, a local middle school teacher has written: "If I do writers workshop 4 days a week and literary circles every Friday I'm concerned students may be too rushed, or there may be too much time in between group meetings. As a result, at the outset I will allow more time for training and practice until I'm certain they have the hang of it. Once the roles are familiar and established, I think I can turn them over to developing reading schedules that have them reading 4 days out of 5 and meeting with lots to talk about on that Friday regarding their books. My final logistical concern is the garnering of the books to be used for this project. I have a good number of books at my disposal, however, I am sure I do not have enough. I think possibly I can get parents to subsidize the cost of books if they could contribute a few dollars for them. Also the PTA is very active and generous in the school and perhaps they would be willing to contribute funds for book purchases. I will see how that all goes as the year progresses."

PREPARING STUDENTS TO PARTICIPATE IN LITERATURE CIRCLES: SIX ROLE SHEETS

LESSON PLAN 1

1. Focus: When was the last time you discussed, really discussed, a book or movie with a friend? Why did you want to talk to someone about that book or movie? (Journal or Response Log)

2. Objective: To understand the nature and requirements of six roles that participants share in small-group discussions.

3. Purpose: To prepare students for six different role tasks that they will be asked to perform at different moments during discussion when they gather for a scheduled group meeting.

4. Input and Modeling: First reading (oral): "The Fox and the Crow" Then (Aesop) and Now (James Thurber, *Fables for Our Time).*

   Second reading (silent): students make notations on whatever is important, whatever they don't understand, whatever they like or dislike, agree or disagree with, and on whatever is related—one part of the story to another (connections).

5. Checking for Understanding: Review directions on each of the six handouts: Characters Master, Discussion Coleaders, Passage Master, WordSmith, Connector, and Movie Critic (when needed).

6. Guided Practice: Divide the class into six small groups and assign each group one of the six tasks.

7. Closure: Review each group's work on each of the six roles. Extol good models and make suggestions for those that need improvement.

HANDOUTS FOR LITERATURE CIRCLES: ROLE SHEETS

1. **Characters Captain:** lists the major characters in the story, gives a brief description of his or her personality, and explains his or her relationship to the other characters in the story.
2. **Discussion Coleaders:** prepares at least five interpretive questions before discussion and asks spontaneous follow-up questions during discussion. The leader also invites each member of the group to contribute what he or she has prepared (passages, vocabulary, and connections).
3. **Passage Master:** selects and reads aloud two or three key passages from the assigned reading, explains why that passage was chosen and then raises questions about them (textual analysis).
4. **Wordsmith:** selects at least five important or unusual vocabulary words and brings them up during discussion when related.
5. **Connector:** prepares at least four questions of evaluation—two based on personal experience and two based on personal values.
6. **The Movie Critic's** role (when a film version is used to follow-up the discussion of a text) is to develop a list of at least five important differences between the movie and the original story.

DISCUSSION COLEADERS HANDOUT

Name ____________________ Date ____________
Group ____________________ Class ____________
Author ____________ Book/Story ____________________

Discussion Coleader: Your job **before** meeting with your group is to *prepare* a list of **10** good interpretive questions for discussion. (The best questions usually come from your own thoughts, feelings, and concerns as you read the story. Whenever possible, add a page reference that made you think of each question.) Your task **during** discussion is to help your group reflect on, share, and develop its own responses to the reading. You do this during discussion by asking good *spontaneous* follow-up questions for clarification, substantiation, and for more opinion. During discussion you should **also** invite each member to contribute the part that he or she has prepared for discussion: important passages, vocabulary, and connections.

Ten prepared interpretive questions for discussion:

1. ____________________
2. ____________________
3. ____________________
4. ____________________
5. ____________________
6. ____________________
7. ____________________
8. ____________________
9. ____________________
10. ____________________