



Literature Circles

Voice and Choice in Book
Clubs and Reading Groups

SECOND EDITION

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Welcome to Literature Circles

BACK IN 1993, when I joined with twenty great teachers to write a book about literature circles, we didn't quite know what we were getting into. We were a loose confederation of colleagues working from kindergarten through college, in city and suburban schools around Chicago. What brought us together was our excitement about the student book clubs meeting in our classrooms, which we called "literature circles."

Using a variety of different structures and procedures that matched our grade levels, we'd been dazzled by what the kids could do when given choices, time, responsibility, a little guidance, and a workable structure. Our students were reading lots of good books, thinking deeply about them, writing notes and journal entries, and joining in lively, informed literature discussions. They shared responses with peers, listened respectfully to one another, sometimes disagreed vehemently, but dug back into the text to settle arguments or validate different interpretations. In short, our kids were acting like real readers, lifelong readers. Oh, sure, there were problems, too: kids who didn't do the reading, off-task discussions, and really noisy rooms. But mostly, it was working. And our group of colleagues was really excited. Literature circles were a pretty nifty little invention that we had created all by ourselves, right here in the rarefied climate of Chicago. Of course, we soon found out that we were not alone at all. All across the country, we had plenty of unmet company, teachers and kids who were inventing and reinventing literature circles of their own.

Today, things have really changed. The world has changed, schools have changed, and literature circles have changed. What used to be a quiet, home-grown activity in a few scattered classrooms has become a trend, a boom, almost a fad. Now tens of thousands of teachers are doing something they call "literature circles." And many other teachers are using classroom activities that look very much the same, which they call "book clubs" or "reading groups." This means that now literally *millions* of students are involved in some kind of small, peer-led reading discussion group.

Over this period of phenomenal growth, the basic definition of LCs has stayed the same, at least for us. Literature circles are small, peer-led discussion groups whose members have chosen to read the same story, poem, article, or book. While reading each group-assigned portion of the text (either in or outside of class), members make notes to help them contribute to the upcoming discussion, and everyone comes to the group with ideas to share. Each group follows a reading and meeting schedule, holding periodic discussions on the way through the book. When they finish a book, the circle members may share highlights of their reading with the wider community; then they trade members with other finishing groups, select more reading, and move into a new cycle.

Members of our teacher team have been able to visit, work in, and steal ideas from hundreds of classrooms around the country where creative teachers are pioneering personalized versions of book clubs. Over the web, we hear from teachers in Australia, Asia, and all corners of Europe who are developing and enjoying some form of literature circles in their classrooms. We were amazed and warmed when we recently received this e-mail from a Chinese educator:

I'm sure it will be hard to open students' mouths back in China because it has been five thousand years that we have been taught to respect experts' opinions and accept them with no doubt. But I'm confident that literature circles will finally make a difference in teaching reading because it represents the nature of literary works, which is life itself. . . . I wish my brave idea will someday come true in China.

—*Bingbing Fan*

Along with all this fast-spreading popularity have come some wonderful new resources, many improved insights, countless inspiring stories—and some worrisome problems, too.

So that's what this revised edition is for: to share what we have learned from ten years of doing literature circles. Among the questions I want to address are, What do we know about literature circles that we didn't understand eight or ten years ago? What new resources and procedures can help teachers organize their classroom book clubs better? What are the most common pitfalls, potholes, and stumbling blocks to successful kid-led discussion groups? Beyond the basics, what do mature or "advanced" literature circles look like? And what just plain errors did I make in the first edition of the book? There's plenty to say in each of these categories.

The core of the book is still a comprehensive and practical description of literature circles: what they are, where they came from, how they operate, what they mean for young readers, and how teachers can integrate them into the broader literacy program, K–12. All these topics have been revised and updated to reflect a decade of practice, problem solving, and refinement.

But there is also lots of new material here, which explains why the book is a bit thicker than the previous incarnation. Among the added ingredients:

- New, more effective activities for preparing students.
- A major reconsideration of role sheets with new guidelines for their use.
- Descriptions of “second-generation” literature circles in various grade levels.
- Dozens of variations on the basic version of student-led book clubs.
- More models and procedures for primary grades.
- A visit to a whole-school literature circle program.
- Key strategies for ensuring deep and sustained discussion.
- An inventory of common management problems and solutions.
- New scheduling patterns for group meetings and reading time.
- Sample mini-lessons for literature circle sessions.
- New materials for assessing and grading literature circles.
- Ideas for using literature circles with nonfiction across the curriculum.
- Plans for starting and sustaining a teachers-as-readers group.
- Notes on the role of parents as at-home reading models and literature circle helpers.
- A review of recent professional materials and research on literature circles.
- An explanation of how literature circles match the national standards for literacy education.

The Literature Circles Boom

This has been a great decade for literature circles. Over the past ten years, a host of positive conditions, both in schools and in the wider culture, have coalesced to support the rapid growth of book clubs for students. Out in the general culture, some of these supportive trends include the following:

Adult Book Clubs Are Burgeoning

Over the past decade, reading groups have become a renewed American pastime. In 1990, there were about 50,000 book clubs in the United States; by the turn of the millennium that number had just about doubled. For many of us teachers trying to bring literature circles into our schools, these adult book clubs have been our implicit model—our prototype. And what a powerful template they are. Our adult book clubs are voluntary groups of friends who meet monthly in one another’s living rooms, in church basements, or in the back rooms of bookstores. We select and read great books, books that move us, that change us as people, that create a powerful and caring community among us.

Then when we go back to our jobs as schoolteachers, we are trying to transfer the energy, the depth of thought and emotion, the lifelong commitment to books and ideas we have experienced ourselves. Whenever we run into

problems translating book clubs to the school world, our own grown-up book club experience serves as our management touchstone. We can always ask ourselves first, Well, how do we deal with this problem in our own reading groups? In short, many of us who have been experimenting with literature circles are simply trying to import a powerful, beautiful, naturally occurring literacy structure called “book clubs” into the public schools—without messing them up.

Publishers’ Support

Trade book publishers have recognized and fed the book club boom, and now offer free reading group discussion guides for their major “quality” titles. Scan the cover of almost any contemporary novel and somewhere you’ll see a headline announcing “reading group guide included.” Some guides are conveniently printed right in the back of the book, while an even larger inventory is available on publishers’ websites. The Random House website, for example, lists more than 100 book club study guides, all immediately downloadable. All these discussion guides, of course, are not just a selfless service to book clubs, but a very low-cost way to promote multiple-copy sales.

The Internet Grows

The Internet has supported the book club trend in a number of ways. Most obviously, there are now countless websites where any reader from around the country can jump into a virtual book discussion at will. There are other sites that tell you step-by-step how to set up and run a book club. Even many traditional face-to-face book clubs have developed websites as a means of communicating with their members, keeping a record of their group’s work, and sharing the group’s ideas about books and about club procedures with a wider audience. The simple miracle of e-mail has unleashed a torrent of pent-up letter-writing activity throughout the country, and is a wonderful tool for talking about books. Meanwhile, websites like amazon.com and bn.com offer readers not just speedy shipping of books but information about authors, reviews by previous readers, sales information, and links to related sites. In the near future, e-books will become another part of our reading lives; we’ll be able to load chosen texts directly into a light, legible, lap-friendly reader, either through our home computer or at a kiosk in the bookstore. Whatever delivery systems may emerge, it is comforting—and perhaps slightly ironic—to note that all this technology, all this marvelous silicon and plastic and bandwidth, are merely taking us back to the basics: to stories, to good old-fashioned flesh-and-blood books.

Oprah Takes the Lead

No single person gets more credit for the book club boom than talk-show host Oprah Winfrey, who founded an on-the-air book club in 1995, recom-

mending one book a month for her viewers and holding periodic book discussion meetings on the show. Since that time, Oprah’s Book Club has sparked the sale of tens of millions of books—and made a lasting contribution to our national literacy.

The broadcasting of book club meetings has opened a window into a world that Oprah’s audience might never have seen. These on-air discussions usually feature a handful of lucky viewers who have written in about the book, nominating themselves for the taping, along with Oprah and the book’s author (who typically keeps quiet during the first phase of the discussion). For people who have never attended a book discussion group, whose vision of book clubs harks back to reading groups in school, this could be a revelation. Instead of chalk and worksheets, there are snacks and candles and comfy chairs and—Toni Morrison! The meetings are held in Oprah’s Chicago apartment, in restaurants, and other cozy locations, and they are casual, spontaneous, free-ranging. Far from being a dry, academic exercise with right answers and grades, these are informal, lively gatherings where everyone can speak their mind—but no one is forced to perform. It isn’t unusual to see group members weep over a passage in a book, pass the tissues, hug one another, sit through a long silence, shout disagreements, or laugh uproariously. The sessions not only make you want to join a book club, but show you how to act when you get there: how to take turns, how to build on other people’s ideas, how to use specific passages in the book to back up your interpretations, and scores of other discussion skills that are used by adults in effective book clubs.

It was back in the mid-1980s when our team in Chicago started experimenting with literature circles in our classrooms. That means a lot of years have intervened, and some significant developments in the school world have favored the spread of book clubs for kids.

Reading Instruction Has Improved

In spite of the notorious and energy-sapping “reading wars” that have pitted phonics fans against literature advocates for the past few decades, reading instruction has generally improved. Kids are reading much more good literature than they were a generation ago. Basal selections are of better quality, longer, and more authentic. In the classroom, having kids read aloud and answer factual recall questions no longer passes for good instruction. Teachers now ask kids to engage text at higher levels of thinking: drawing inferences, forming hypotheses, making judgments, and supporting conclusions about what they read. Independent reading time is sanctioned within virtually all school schedules, with activities like reading workshop, SSR (sustained silent reading) and DEAR (drop everything and read).

Literature circles are one of the hottest trends in language arts teaching. Two experts in the field offer insights and advice about using this instructional strategy. Included: Valuable resources for teachers who want to learn more about using literature circles in their classrooms. "I love it! The kids love it! I get goose bumps when I walk around the room and hear the excitement about books!" wrote one teacher in a recent listserv posting. While literature circles are often seen as more suitable for older students, rich conversations, observations and wonderings about texts are possible at all year levels, even as early as Foundation to Year 2. Teacher support and involvement needs to be adjusted to reflect the students' abilities and needs. Apart from familiarising students with the roles or scaffolds, teachers could introduce the books and gently suggest aspects of each that the students might focus on.