



SAMPLE MATERIAL

Using Literature Circles for Reading Comprehension

University Park Campus School, Massachusetts

Topic: Helping Students Navigate the Path to College

Practice: Prepare Students Academically

Teachers at University Park Campus School (UPCS) use literature circles to facilitate students' critical thinking during in-class reading assignments. This document describes one teacher's methods of implementing literature circles, including assigning roles, allowing time for individual review and group discussion, and circulating among the groups to further encourage thoughtful conversation about the work. Teachers can use this document as a guide to using literature circles to engage students in higher-level text discussions.

Learning to Talk About Books

For the past several years, I have begun my first quarter by implementing literature circles in my classroom. I consider this one of the most effective ways to support students as they begin to think critically about books. Literature circles enhance the belief that the text is subject to a variety of interpretations, and allow readers the opportunity to explore and discuss within a community of readers.

When I initially introduce literature circles in my classroom, I do it in a very prescribed way. This is because in addition to being a way to teach my students to talk productively about books, it is also instrumental in building a community that allows risk-taking with regards to literary interpretation. The fact that in literature circles students are responsible for assuming specific roles in the discussion allows me to group them according to their particular strengths and weaknesses. This is particularly effective in helping to support English language learners, because it offers them access to the discussion of literature in a small group setting, which is much less intimidating. It also offers these students the opportunity to express their feelings about the text through art work and to investigate the meanings of unfamiliar words.

At the beginning of the class, I provide each student with a handout which describes the various roles they will be assuming as they participate in the circles. It is important that each student receive a copy of the roles sheet prior to the reading of the story to assist him/her in the reading/responding process. This is another way to enhance their stance as critical readers.

Figure 1: Roles for Literature Circles

SUMMARIZER – Gives a brief summary of the day's reading, including the highlights and main idea.

DISCUSSION DIRECTOR – Asks three open response questions about the day's reading. Why? How? If?

PASSAGE MASTER – Locates three sections of the text to revisit. Cites the specific passage and page number, and explains the choice.

LITERARY LUMINARY – Finds three single words that are unfamiliar. Cite the word and page on which it is located and then define the word, using a dictionary.

CONNECTOR – Makes three connections between the story and the world outside.

ARTFUL ARTIST – Draws a picture of a meaningful part of the day's reading and explains the choice.

It is important to note that there a variety of ways to use literature circles in the classroom. Although this is a method that works well for me, it is possible to modify this strategy in any way that best fits the needs of your individual classroom. For this reason, I have included a list of web sites and articles regarding this practice in the bibliography.

One variable in the success of the literature circles never changes, and that is the responsibility of the teacher to circulate among the groups in order to ensure that the group stays on track and completes their assigned tasks. After each group completes their assignments, I ask them to report out to the whole group, who then is able to comment on the discoveries of their peers.

I should note here that during the regular school year, I implement the circles somewhat differently. During that time, I assign three groups of students to the six roles on the handout, with the ultimate goal being that every student has the opportunity to become familiar with every role, and are therefore comfortable viewing the story from any of these perspectives. We then move to the next level, which is having three circles functioning in the classroom simultaneously. However, due to the time constraints, I have modified the process.