Why Use Literature Circles in a Social Studies Classroom?

With the implementation of the new Common Core Standards into the majority of the schools across the United States, it has become imperative for the social studies classroom to become a more active, inquiry-based learning environment in order to meet the needs of students in the new millennium. The designers of the Common Core Standards explain that extensive research determined the need for “college and career ready students to be proficient in reading complex informational text independently in a variety of content areas.”¹

Literature Circles are frequently used in English/Language Arts classrooms as a means of promoting active analysis and discussion of the text by the students themselves. Research has shown that frequent participation in authentic discussion can promote democratic ideals:

The habits conducive to free inquiry don’t just happen with age and maturity. They take root slowly. And uncertainties, multiple viewpoints, the use of independent judgment, and pleasure in imaginative play aren’t luxuries to be grafted on to the mind-set of a mature scholar, suited only to the gifted few, or offered after school on a voluntary basis to the children of parents inclined this way. It’s my contention that these are required habits of a sound citizenry, habits that take time and practice. (81)

Meier reminds us that active, frequent engagement in meaningful discussions not only promotes learning of the skills and substance of a particular subject but fosters an environment of tolerance, critical thinking, and democratic spirit.²

How Do Literature Circles Work?

In order for literature circles to function well and for the students to be successful participants in inquiry-based discussions, we, the teachers, must have a clear idea of the key components of functioning literature circles.

Text Selection

This is perhaps the most important component of effective literature circles. If the text we give the students is too complex and there are not enough scaffolding supports for the students to be successful, they will become frustrated and discussions will disintegrate to gripes and complaints. If the text we give the students is too simplistic and provides no intriguing arguments or information to analyze, then the students will not be engaged in authentic inquiry and discussion and feel that the activity is pointless. Since the text is at the heart of the discussion, it is appropriate to spend some time considering various features of each text that is selected for use.

¹ [http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/introduction/key-design-consideration](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/introduction/key-design-consideration)

If you are uncertain as to how complex a text is or to what reading level it might belong, you can access a free leveling program through Lexile Measures. A Lexile measure is just a way of discussing how complex a text is based upon the vocabulary or words used in that text. In Georgia, for example, our students end of the year standardized test yields a Lexile score for each student and is reported back to the school. Teachers can use that score to pair students with texts that are appropriate for the reading level. However, anyone can use the Lexile measures to estimate the appropriateness of a text for their students. The Lexile Analyzer on their website even allows teachers to enter a sample paragraph from a text and receive a Lexile level for that piece. In this way, we can evaluate our primary source documents like journals, letters, legal documents, newspaper article, etc., to see if they are appropriate for our students reading ability levels.

Then it is important to look at a document and determine what argument the author is making, what the author’s purpose for writing may have been, or what key concepts or topics are there for the students to discuss. Any texts that you select should solicit debatable opinions and invite multiple perspectives. In the sample literature circles we have provided, we intentionally group a secondary source document, a primary source document, and a visual (graph, chart, political cartoon, etc.) that all support a particular point of view or argument for an event in history. Typically, you can locate a secondary source document, or even create one of your own, that is on a reading level appropriate for your average student. This text will be accessible for the majority of your students and give a good foundation for the topic being explored. The primary source document will usually be the one that is at the higher reading level due to antiquated language and expressions or jargon as is used in legal documents. Thematically this piece will still lend more support to the topic introduced in the secondary source document. Lastly the visual document is vital to allowing even your lowest level readers an opportunity to discuss and contribute in the group discussion.

Grouping

Obviously, you can group your students however you think they may work best. If you are grouping the homogeneously, then you should create your text sets so that there is a low, middle, and high level texts. If you use any type of heterogeneously mixed grouping, whether planned or randomly selected, then you should design your text sets as describe above, so that every student can access the information at their level.

Before ever moving your students into small group discussions, you should conduct a couple of literature circle discussions as a whole class. The teacher as a facilitator of large group discussion

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3 http://www.lexile.com/analyzer/
serves as a powerful model for the students, who are likely to imitate what the teacher does when he or she participates in a small group environment.4

Discussions

It is important to note at this point that inquiry based discussions are not ones conducted in the traditional style of leading students to answers the teacher already knows. The intention here is to lead class discussion that invite all students to contribute to the exploration of ideas. By hearing a variety of thoughts, by challenging each other’s positions, by supporting their own position, by trying to understand the positions of others, and by assessing the merit of others’ thoughts, students become involved in complex thinking processes that foster understanding and support effective problem solving and decision making skills.5

In order to create authentic discussions like this in social studies classrooms, it it critical that the topics we choose to discuss be problematic and raise doubt about some aspect of the concept that is the focus of the current inquiry.6 This naturally lends itself to providing students with the opportunity to evaluate and decide for themselves whether or not they agree with the U.S.’s decision to intern Japanese-Americans during World War II, or whether the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand truly sparked World War I. This process of evaluating and determining one’s own position is what makes historical inquiry and study compelling and relevant for our students.

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Moving Into the Small Groups

The greatest fear any teacher has when beginning to implement literature circles into his or her classroom is whether or not the students will actually accomplish anything sitting in a group with their peers. Letting go of those reins that we so carefully manage and manipulate to control the varying dynamics of the unique personalities of each class is horrifying, and many teachers just can’t seem to picture small group discussion as anything other than total chaos. However, there are a few steps in planning your small group discussion that can help facilitate a productive and beneficial experience for your students and you.

First of all, every classroom should be an environment where the students feel safe to express their opinions and ideas without fear of being ridiculed or ignored. This foundational element is essential to any civilized discussion, not just small group discussions. As facilitators in these literature circles, it is important to consider the benefits and disadvantages of random versus strategically grouped students. Obviously, it’s quicker to just randomly number students and send each number to its designated area to meet. Each group would provide a variety of interests, abilities, and personalities; however, this method might also yield groups of students who have interpersonal conflicts with each other or groups of unmotivated and low level readers who find the task impossible on their own. In order to help ensure a successful literature circle experience, it would be beneficial to intentional group students by ability levels, motivational levels, and personalities issues. You might also consider using these particular groupings multiple times over a quarter or semester before rearranging the students in order to give them an opportunity to improve upon their group dynamics.

Also it’s helpful to have the classroom ready to work in groups so that value time and concentration is not lost during transition. Because our students are adolescents, maintaining their attention is a challenge. So before moving to small groups, you should explain the task they are to complete in small groups. These texts should inspire debatable questions, and it is important to note that you can provide scaffolded questions with the text sets in order to help facilitate the discussions. You should also outline the group procedures indicating the time limit for discussion, whether or not you will be grading them on any aspect of the small group discussion, and what roles, if any, the students will have to perform.

In traditional language arts literature circles at an elementary level, roles like “discussion director” or “word wizard” are given so that each member has a specific role to contribute to the small group discussion. However, its also possible to just simplify this process and designate a leader, a recorder,
and a reporter for each group. The need to assign specific roles to individual students may decrease through time and experience as students become more comfortable with the expectations for small group participation.

During the actual small group discussions, the teacher’s primary role is to monitor the group behavior, beginning first the group which may struggle the most and then moving to the others to make sure everyone understands the task. Then constant monitoring, or eavesdropping on discussions, will help you gauge how the students are doing, topics that need to be discussed in the whole group setting, or determine if more time is needed.

It is vitally important that before the end of the class period you bring the students back to a whole group discussion to share ideas that have been created and presented in small groups. This is also an opportunity for you to refocus the students on the larger task at hand which would be how they will frame their argument for the essay.