

# Literature Circles Go to College

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*ABSTRACT: In basic writing classrooms and scholarship, reading too often remains invisible; neither research nor established practice provides tangible activities to support reading and connect it to writing. This article documents a search for structured, scaffolded, low-stakes reading activities, a search that moves off the college campus and into the elementary classroom where reading is more commonly taught. It is in this classroom space that Harvey Daniels's Literature Circles have evolved, and they offer a model for helping students engage in and experience reading as a process that supports and complements writing. The article posits Literature Circles, a student-centered and collaborative approach to reading used primarily in the lower grades, as a methodology that can offer college-level, basic-writing students an inventory of reading strategies for entering and navigating a text, initiating textual discussions, deepening comprehension of and connection to reading, and expanding the experience of writing.*

*KEYWORDS: developmental reading; literature circles; basic writing; K-12; pedagogy; collaborative learning; scaffolding*

One fall semester in my developmental reading and writing classroom, we were reading James McBride's *The Color Of Water*, a text I thought was fairly accessible and enjoyable. I assigned chapters to read and expected the students to come to class ready for a discussion. Standing in the front of the room, I asked a question. No one made a move, not even an uncomfortable "Don't call on me" kind of look. Nothing. A thin, blonde, denim-jacket wearing young man in the front row complained that the book was hard because, he believed, the characters were speaking in a foreign language. Also in the front row was Larissa, a young Russian woman who was hard of hearing but could read my lips. Larissa was always prepared and ready to answer my questions but when she did, none of the other students could understand her. A young African-American woman always sat against the wall in the back row and she, too, was always prepared. She told me she liked the book. Unfortunately, she routinely walked in with a bagel and a carton of Tropicana thirty minutes late—just about the same time I usually gave up on a class discussion, adjusted my plans, and had students work on drafts or do free writing. Always sitting in the last row, tilting his chair back against the wall and turning his face up to the ceiling, Jero let me know he

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was repeating the class because he did not do schoolwork, did not want to be in school, and was only attending so his parents could keep him on their health insurance.

Desperate to get the students to read, I gave easy reading quizzes with straightforward factual questions such as, “Who is old man Shilsky? Who is Gladys? Where did Ruth’s mother die?” When they arrived on time for class, my readers completed the quizzes; the rest of the students received zero after zero. If I could not get my college students to read the assigned pages and answer direct questions, how were we supposed to hold reading-based conversations and write reading-based essays? What I discovered was that students wanted me to stand in the front of the room and tell them the story. I was becoming jaded by their familiar behaviors: groaning when I assigned homework or forgetting it had been assigned; putting their heads on their desks signaling boredom; entering class late with music seeping through their ear buds and bumping fists as they walked to their seats; or engaging in what Sizer calls the “conspiracy for the least,” where students agree to “behave as long as teachers require very little of them” (qtd. in Shor 142). Frustrated with my students and myself, I needed to find another way to conduct my class, another way to engage the students in the texts and subsequent discussions. But this default, teacher-centered pedagogy was all I knew.

We know that under-prepared or unmotivated students are not well served through traditional lectures and teacher-centered classrooms. Believing that knowledge is socially constructed, we create active, student-centered, and collaborative classrooms. We teach writing as a process, guiding students by using our catalogue of structured, scaffolded, low-stakes writing activities and peer-review sessions. The problem with this approach is that, too often, we assume that students know how to read actively, that reading has already been taught in the primary grades and therefore does not need to be the focus of our writing classes. We expect students to be able to assume the stance of experienced readers. But many basic writers are also basic readers, who need the same structured methodologies of scaffolded, low-stakes, and collaborative activities for the reading process as they do for the writing process.

Many developmental students, like many traditional students, see their course texts as information to study or memorize; thus, they remain both intellectually and personally separated from course materials, including their own writing. Absent is the student as reader. If the act of revision situates writers as readers of their own work (Berthoff), and if students are removed from experiencing their own writing as readers—if they approach their work exclusively as writers and not as readers—how can they effectively

revise? For the composition teacher laboring without tangible reference to activities for developing reading in the basic writing classroom, reading remains essentially invisible. The basic writer and the basic writing teacher are left separated from the role of reading in learning to write; they are left searching for what to do.

Chance led me to a new idea for a literacy model that I might adapt for use in my integrated basic reading and writing classroom when my eleven-year-old nephew told me about an activity called Literature Circles. Responding to my inquiry—What are you doing in English class?—he explained how he had to read a story and complete a worksheet for homework. Then in class, he would sit in a circle with a few classmates and discuss the story—exactly what I wanted to see in my college classroom. He was in the sixth grade, dialoguing with his peers about a book. How could I get my college basic reading and writing students to replicate the textual discussions that my nephew was having in the sixth grade?

My own search for structured, scaffolded, low-stakes reading activities took me off the college campus and out of composition scholarship and back into the elementary classroom where reading is a focus of teaching. It is in this classroom space where I found Harvey Daniels's Literature Circles, a methodology for helping students engage in and experience reading as a process in the basic writing classroom.

### **Evaluating Student Needs at the College Level: Is Reading Even a Problem?**

Reading is becoming more of a focus in the field of composition, but its existence in the conversation remains inconsistent. For instance, Linda Adler-Kassner and Heidi Estrem note, "While reading pedagogy within the composition literature is not particularly well-developed, 'critical reading' is one of the primary headings of the WPA Outcomes Statement" (37). Still, we do find within the scholarship serious exploration of the place of reading in learning to write, the types of reading most effective in the writing classroom, and reading as critical thinking for writing students.<sup>1</sup> The voices within the academy, however, are not as loud as those outside the academy, where many stakeholders passionately express their concerns with reading in the form of national reading movements, community book clubs, celebrity book clubs such as Oprah Winfrey's, and government surveys and reports.

Most of the scholarship in reading at the college level remains in the shadow (or perhaps in the service) of writing. As recently as 2009, Diane

DeVido Tetreault and Carol Center comment, “As first-year composition teachers, we wholeheartedly agree that this reality—students’ lack of experience as critical readers of difficult texts—is one that composition teachers too often ignore” (45). Tetreault and Center discuss reading strategies of experienced readers and argue, “Such reading strategies are routinely discussed in reading pedagogy, but much of this scholarship is housed in the discipline of education rather than English studies, often with a focus on K-12” (46). Likewise, in her 2003 book *Intertexts: Reading Pedagogy in College Writing Classrooms*, Marguerite Helmers points out that only “a handful of articles on reading pedagogy appeared in the major journals of composition studies between 1980 and 1999” (7). “The act of reading,” she proclaims, “is not part of the common professional discourse in composition studies” (4). She also points out that most of the reading research has been supported by the International Reading Association (IRA), “an organization to which most college professors do not belong. Furthermore, the publishers who address the teaching of reading as a process tend to focus on the market for Grades K-12....” (4). In his 2007 review, “Learning to Read as Continuing Education,” David Jolliffe echoes Helmers’ earlier observation, “Reading is a concept largely absent from the theory and practice of college composition” (473). This absence may be due to a presumption that college students can read; we simply expect they can move smoothly through literature interpretation and expository writing. But we quickly discover, as David Jolliffe and Allison Harl note in their 2008 study examining the reading lives of their college students, that “As they read, students need to be walked through demonstrations of mature, committed adult readers who draw connections to the world around them, both historical and current and to other texts” (613). Our students read passively, sliding over the words, missing subtle nuances, and privileging personal narrative in place of the broader connections we anticipate.

Our classroom experiences with our basic writers’ reading proficiencies, along with the variety of national reports on reading practices of older students, should remind us that reading is important in college and beyond. One such report, the ACT *National Curriculum Survey*, measures the “educational practices and expectations” among middle, high, postsecondary (teachers of credit-bearing college courses), and remedial teachers in both public and private institutions across the country. ACT notes, “There are misalignments between postsecondary instructors’ expectations and high school teachers’ evaluations of student readiness” (5). With respect to reading, the discrepancies are stunning. While high school teachers, postsecondary, and remedial

teachers agree about the importance of reading, there is strong disagreement about how prepared the students are. Here is but one example: 30% of high school teachers feel as if all, or nearly all, of their students “meet the required level of reading comprehension for students beginning entry-level college courses in [their] discipline” (42). On the other hand, 4% of postsecondary teachers feel as if all or nearly all of their students meet “expectations for the reading comprehension of incoming students in [their] discipline” (42).

But the news is not all bad. An increase in literary reading has been observed in the public sector, as revealed by the NEA *Survey of Public Participation in the Arts*. The question querying reading practices of adults and the corresponding responses reveals, “In 2008, 54 percent of adults indicated they had read a book during the previous 12 months that was not required for work or school, a 2 percentage point decline from 2002. However, the percentage of adults reading ‘literature’ (defined as plays, poetry, or novels) increased from 47 percent of adults in 2002 to 50 percent in 2008. Increases in literary reading occurred across virtually all demographic groups” (29). It may come as a surprise to some critics of traditional college-aged readers which population saw the sharpest increase in reading: “For young adults (18–24), literary reading increased at the sharpest rate relative to other age groups. Between 2002 and 2008, their literary reading rate grew by nine percentage points, to 52 percent” (31). Even with this seemingly good news, another NEA report, *To Read or Not to Read*, opens on a foreboding note:

- Americans are spending less time reading.
- Reading comprehension skills are eroding.
- These declines have serious civic, social, cultural, and economic implications (7).

Much of the academic research echoes these less optimistic strains about eroding reading skills: “Generally speaking, reading is not taught beyond the third grade in most schools. If a student has not mastered reading comprehension skills by fourth grade, chances are that s/he will struggle with learning in grades four through twelve” (Forget et al. 3). In the developmental English class, we do not expect to instruct our students in phonics, decoding, word recognition, and vocabulary (outside of discourse-specific vocabulary). We presume our students have developed these proficiencies during their K–12 years and are prepared for the challenges and demands of college-level work; we labor under the premise that simply teaching writing is demanding enough. Furthermore, our students are digitally socialized, nimbly navigating an electronic terrain as bloggers, tweeters, FB friends, webpage creators, uploaders, downloaders, and gamers. They reside in the rapid and

abbreviated world of text messages, IM, and iChat; master communication instantaneous and spontaneous; interact, engage, and “graz[e] through huge amounts of information” (Plafrey and Gasser 243) in new configurations of multitasking. Yet, no matter how many gadgets they can manipulate and how deft the language play, Marisa A. Klages and J. Elizabeth Clark remind us, “While many basic writers come to us today with the fluency of digital natives, they still have the same need for learning writing and critical thinking skills that has traditionally marked basic writers” (33). The conclusion is clear: We need to expand reading research and develop reading pedagogies for the basic writing classroom.

### **The Realities of Reading in a Developmental Urban Community College Classroom**

At my urban community college, approximately 70% of the entering students are considered not “college ready.” Their scores on the reading and writing placement exams indicate they need to strengthen their competence in both reading and writing to prepare for our regular college English sequence. Many of these developmental reading and writing students have come from the city’s public high schools where, as I have observed, they often sit in crowded classrooms with over forty students of various proficiencies for a forty-minute English class. For much of their schooling, they have been indoctrinated into an autocratic classroom. They follow the rules of the Initiate-Respond-Evaluate (IRE) classroom (Mehan) which situates the students as unknowing hunters in search of valued answers and the teacher as all-knowing keeper of meaning. Students often maintain an efferent stance, as their purpose for reading is to take away information they need to know now or use at a later time (Rosenblatt). From their perspective, reading is impersonal, an activity for gathering information, enacting what Marcia Dickson observes as a characteristic of a basic reader who believes the text “serves only as one-way communication from author to reader. . . . [The text’s] purpose is to give information, nothing more” (n. pag.). Students read the chapter and answer the questions on the last page; read the chapter and get quizzed; or don’t read the chapter and the teacher will explain it anyway. Reading in this manner leaves little concern for fluency, analysis, or comprehension of a text as a whole. Students see reading as a linear experience, not a recursive process that requires them to press through complexities, make connections, and identify relationships within a larger context. Nor do they trust themselves as readers to stumble through uncertainty and allow a text

to eventually unfold. It is more common for them to give up, say they are confused, and wait for the teacher to tell them what the reading is about and what they should think. In this way, students are essentially voiceless. Especially for the most inexperienced readers, these programmed patterns of response often result in assuming two powerless positions: 1) foregrounding the text with its “correct” answers as artifacts to be studied, disembodied entities containing information for tests, and 2) expecting the teacher to reveal the one and only correct meaning of a text. For many students, this programmed disengagement has been the level at which they have learned to read and, perhaps, is all that was ever asked of them.

The mid-level developmental English course I teach is an integrated reading and writing course officially titled “Developing Fluency in Reading and Writing,” but nicknamed “Basic Writing.” Even though our departmental philosophy supports the integration of reading and writing and essays are reading-based, my colleagues and I have always considered this class a writing class. This is not the only paradox. The end-of-term assessment tool is a writing and reading portfolio consisting of two reading-based essays (an in-class essay and a teacher-guided, multiple-draft essay) and a departmental writing and reading exam, consisting of an on-the-spot reading accompanied by a dozen short-answer questions; however, the University’s multiple-choice reading entrance exam, which is also considered in exiting the course, trumps our departmental reading exam. In other words, students who do not pass our English department’s short-answer reading comprehension measure but do pass the University’s multiple-choice comprehension measure are allowed to advance. Thus, teachers and students receive a mixed message regarding the institution’s views on reading. After all, does a passing score on a multiple-choice test really mean that students are competent college-level readers? This multiple-choice exam largely reinforces the impression that reading comprehension consists of employing strategies for short term gain, for instance: skimming a passage, reading the questions, returning to the passage to find the answers; reading one question at a time and pecking out answers from the text; using common sense to eliminate one or more answers, greatly improving chances of getting the correct answer; and, of course, old-fashioned guessing, leaving reading reduced to chance. More detrimental, this multiple-choice exam does not reveal information about the students’ abilities and struggles, and what specific proficiencies they need to develop.

At the same time that students are enrolled in developmental English courses, they are taking college-level content courses, requiring that they

read textbooks and understand the discourse of the disciplines; the teachers of content courses are similarly short changed by the multiple-choice exam, which is an inaccurate gauge of students' actual abilities. The professors of content courses expect college students to possess the characteristics of experienced readers who can negotiate a text; extract, organize, and prioritize; and synthesize information on their own, without scaffolding and without sustained assistance, meeting college expectations. The preferred pedagogy is often lecture and reading done at home followed by quizzes and/or multiple-choice tests. And although professors may not admit it, "Students can actually pass exams if they come to the lectures and take (or buy) good notes, whether or not they have read the assigned material" (Jolliffe and Harl 600).

Political pressure keeps outcomes-based assessment ubiquitous: we quantitatively measure students' and schools' successes, measurements that we as teachers know do not necessarily take into account differences in classroom structures, student populations, or areas of study. Also missing from percentages of how many students pass a course or stay in school is the reflective practitioner, the teacher-researcher whose classroom narratives present humanistic and rich qualitative data about students, curriculum, and pedagogy (Cochran-Smith and Lytle; Dewey; Hubbard and Power; Two-Year College English Association). How ironic that it was not the quantitative data, rather it was the qualitative data, the myriad empirical studies of Literature Circles that compelled me to adopt this methodology.

### **Literature Circles: A Process Approach to Reading as Meaning Making**

Moving students closer to a place where there is a more sustained and meaningful relationship between reader and text, where uncovering or recalling specific information is not the primary focus, and where meaning is continually constructed is a challenge in the developmental reading and writing classroom. Literature Circles, structured discussion groups, provide students with opportunities to discuss, respond, and reflect upon the reading material. Informed by psycholinguistics and rooted in reader-response theory, Literature Circles cast students in the role of active participant, not "passive recipient" (Rosenblatt 4).

In the twenty-plus years that grade schools have been employing this methodology, many variations have been documented. Harvey Daniels, the name most often associated with Literature Circles, explains the practice as small structured discussion groups of ideally four to five students who stay



together through the reading of a whole text. The group of students discusses sections of the text during class time for about thirty minutes on a regular and predictable basis.

Chiefly, Literature Circles scaffold transactional reading. David Wood, Jerome Bruner, and Gail Ross, who studied young children working with building blocks, define scaffolding as a means to facilitate a task beyond the students' capacity. Twenty-eight years later, Derek Holton and David Clarke, using mathematics as an example, expanded the definition of scaffolding with the idea of empowering the learner as the most significant criteria. They explain scaffolding as "support[ing] the immediate construction of knowledge" and "provid[ing] a basis for independent learning" (131). In Literature Circles, the critical and analytical reading we would like to cultivate is scaffolded by role worksheets, which provide a deliberate point of access to the text, an immediate purpose for reading other than fact-finding, and support for students' personal responses, with the overall aim of facilitating a self-generating and self-sustaining multi-perspective collaborative conversation. In fact, we could also say that the Literature Circle itself is a form of reciprocal scaffolding (Holton and Clarke), with students collaboratively helping each other.

Students complete their role worksheets as homework or during silent reading time in class and arrive in the circle ready to dialogue. In each circle session, students perform a different role, which represent the multiple perspectives that experienced readers naturally take. The role of discussion director is the part of us that is always questioning as we read, leading the directions that our textual exploration takes. The literary luminary is the reader in us who identifies memorable passages to reread, analyze, or share. As content connector, we make associations and connect a text with our experiences, our community, and other texts. Examining a character through dialogue, behavior, and actions places us in the role of character coordinator. When we encounter and define new words in a reading, we are word wizards. As summarizer, we recap the storyline(s) as we go. A group sheet can be created for the collective findings and a reflection sheet can be created to capture the students' individual reflections on their reading experiences. The various roles and role sheets engage students at the level of their unique circumstances, prior knowledge, and experiences, providing a context as students build upon their own knowledge with new information and perspectives and promoting comprehension by encouraging students to become personally involved with the text. Exposing students to the diverse lenses through which a text can be viewed not only adds to their understanding,

but also challenges them to reflect, reconsider, and re-evaluate what they know and to respect what they do not know.

As scaffolding tools, the different roles provide diverse access points to enter and discuss a text, the way more experienced readers engage with a reading. At the same time, students are building sophisticated skills, such as close reading and analyzing, and advancing complex thinking, curiosity, and student-generated inquiry—all vital proficiencies for college-level learning. Additionally, students are further developing oral language skills as they share and negotiate their experiences with peers. This malleable modality has infinite possibilities depending on the text as well as the teacher's and students' creativity, patience, and persistence.

The robust literature on the pedagogical model of Literature Circles has shown that K-12 students respond to its opportunities for self-investment.<sup>2</sup> As described by Daniels, the model of peer-led literature discussion groups evolved out of the elementary school classrooms in the 1980s, pioneered by Becky Abraham Searle (role sheets) and Karen Smith (small groups of students discussing their independent reading). The practice morphed and expanded in different contexts and for different purposes. For instance, Jeremy Harste, Kathy Short, and Carolyn Burke practiced authoring cycles, where groups of students discussed their own story drafts with their peers, and soon expanded this same peer-discussion model for studying other class texts. Further classroom research into this student-led, independent reading model followed.<sup>3</sup> Out of these experiences of collaborative learning, reader-response criticism, and independent reading grew the belief that “Literature Circles have the potential to transform power relationships in the classroom, to make kids both more responsible for and more in control of their own education, to unleash life long readers, and to nurture a critical, personal stance toward ideas” (Daniels 31).

In spite of these advantages, college instructors may resist experimentation with the Literature Circle model, arguing that it lacks sophistication, compartmentalizes reading, disrupts fluency of comprehension and discussion, and may make students dependent on the role sheets. Some may also argue that for college students, employing an adolescent classroom activity and slowing down the reading process is impractical in a twelve- or fifteen-week semester with so much other material to cover. First, we need to resist labeling “unsophisticated” reading practices as immature or seeing scaffolding as “compartmentalizing.” The developmental reader is an emergent reader still gaining the proficiencies necessary for rigorous college-level work. The Literature Circle model is predicated on fostering textual interaction

and thoughtful discussion. The purpose of scaffolding is to reduce tasks into manageable parts to lessen students' frustration and disappointment when tackling challenging material and instill a sense of control over their learning. Developing this sense of control will certainly consume class time, but in the end, it is time well spent. Teachers may also worry that students will become reliant on role worksheets (Wolsey). Like training wheels on a bicycle, the worksheets are temporary devices. Routine implementation of role worksheets will naturally result in a familiarity and comfort and will no longer be needed. Daniels exhorts that the sheets should be provisional and transitional devices. Some instructors may believe that at the college level—where students are expected to read a variety of texts, determine what is significant, and discuss at an in-depth level—the small groups of developmental students will not be able to accomplish any of these tasks without the leadership of a teacher. Teachers are not absent in this model. Rather, the self-directedness of the circle discussion should be balanced with teacher guidance (Daniels). Teachers can move in and out of many roles<sup>4</sup> within the context of the circle dynamics, individual students' needs, the text being used, and the whole class. Literature Circles have been successfully adapted for use with textbooks and other non-fiction materials, particularly in science (Miller et al.; Straits and Nichols), social studies (McCall; Stix), non-fiction, and textbooks (Stein and Beed; Wilfong). Teachers are experimenting with numerous variations of Literature Circles both in content and text. As we search for effective classroom practices for developing reading at the college level, the Literature Circle is a modality that deserves consideration; it offers students an invaluable inventory of reading strategies for navigating a text and initiating textual discussions.

### **Motivating and Empowering Readers**

As we have learned from John Dewey, engaging in a real experience as opposed to sitting outside an experience is what stimulates thinking and reflection. To that end, successful educational approaches are those that “give pupils something to do, not something to learn; and the doing is of such a nature as to demand thinking, or the intentional noting of connections; learning naturally results” (154). Never having used Literature Circles or even felt comfortable doing group work, I forced myself to begin using this method the first week of school; if I did not dive in, I knew I would back out. My first attempt using Literature Circles was a fall semester in my mid-level developmental reading and writing class. The twenty-one students had not

passed either the reading or writing placement measures. Only a handful of them were continuing students who had moved from the lower level of developmental sequence; the rest were incoming freshmen. The class was reading *The Color Of Water* (I had decided to try it again using the new methodology). I copied the role worksheets (Appendix A) and a group sheet (where one student chosen by the group each week would record the group's findings during their discussions) as presented in Daniels's books. However, I made an initial change and renamed the Literature Circles "Reading Circles" and role worksheets "task sheets." I randomly distributed the task sheets for the first homework assignment. I explained to the students what to do and prayed they would come to class Monday morning prepared. I was surprised when they arrived ready and cynically assumed it was merely first-week best behavior. Students moved into groups without a fuss and I indulged in a split-second fantasy: readers in small circles immersed in a passionate hour-long textual discussion and reuniting as a class to share their findings. But I quickly returned to reality and feared the small-group behaviors I had seen in the past: students who are unprepared; discussions that disintegrate into gossip; and textual talk that turns into text messaging.

True to form, the first few times, students sat in their reading circles, fidgeted with their papers, and waited for someone else to begin. When they spoke, they robotically read their responses, making no eye contact with one another. When I stood near a group, the student speaking would look up from the face-in-the-paper position, looking for approval as if I, all-knowing-grade-giver, had the only eyes and ears in the classroom. After their quick, somewhat mechanical exchanges, usually completed in significantly less than thirty minutes, students would shout, "We're done, Miss."

Yet, the students were reading, responding, and collaborating—albeit hesitantly. I had created a reflection sheet (Appendix B) for all students to complete at the end of each Reading Circle session. These sheets exposed candid feedback about the methodology, the text, and students' reactions to one another. Most importantly, their reflections evidenced shifts in their reading practices and the authenticity of the Reading Circle conversations. Below, I discuss some reflection sheet responses, which highlight how the Reading Circles worked. (Student comments have not been altered for correctness and student names are pseudonyms chosen by each student.) After the midterm, I began taping some of the sessions, particularly when I began to reshape the Reading Circle activity, as described in the next section.

The students' stiff and awkward conversations during the first Reading Circle session do not carry over into their earliest written reflections, which

are mostly marked by enthusiasm. For instance, Kay, a 20-something Puerto Rican man, who commuted over an hour each day from the Bronx because he wanted to get as far away as he could from his neighborhood, writes: “My experience was good. Coming up with questions while reading gave me more insight on what I was reading. Most of the time when I read, I just read on and don’t really think about what I’m reading. My specific task [discussion director] made me more interested in the book.” His candor affirms what we already know: Students “read on” because the pages are assigned for homework, not because they are engaged or interested. He also admits that his usual stance was not to “think” about what he was reading. I assume Kay equates the word “think” with the idea of “taking control” of his reading. In other words, Kay was probably used to reading that required he know basic information, where the teacher ultimately controlled what needed to be learned about the text. But with the task sheet, Kay had to think in order to create the questions to present to his circle of peers; he had to be in charge and responsible for his own learning and his questions would also influence the learning of the group.

While Kay notes a difference in his reading process, Baby evaluates this new way of reading against her familiar ways of reading: looking for answers. She reports, “These task sheets help me understand the book more. This is a better technique than giving us questions to answer that an average student would just look up, as if the book were reading is a dictionary.” She confirms what we know about the common intention of reading: finding answers. I sense a tone of disapproval about this familiar method of reading for answers. On the first day diagnostic, Baby wrote about her desire to be “so focused and dedicated to work.” She said she hoped to become a nurse someday. Yet Baby had borrowed my extra copy of the book the first weekend, promising to have the book the following week, which turned into more than half the semester; it wasn’t until after Thanksgiving when she finally purchased the book. Nevertheless, she borrowed my book every week and did her best to complete the homework. Both Kay and Baby acknowledge that, guided by their specific task sheets, reading becomes a different event: more purposeful and deliberate, an act no longer strictly linear, an act that demands a deeper level of engagement.

After a few weeks, I noticed the students were more comfortable with each other; I decided to take a risk and “college-up” the Reading Circle experience. I started with the task sheets. Instead of having one role per sheet, they now had four or five, requiring students to engage with the text from a variety of perspectives. I hoped to not only cultivate longer, richer discussions, but

also gently nudge the students to “read broadly and think deeply” as they shifted back and forth among the many moves of the proficient reader (Keene and Zimmerman). The students rose to the challenge. They easily completed the new multi-role task sheet.

Collaborating with peers and constructing meanings through a multiplicity of perspectives supports the social nature of learning, enriches comprehension (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, and Gamoran; Gilbert; Jewell and Pratt,) and advances the development and construction of meaning and higher order thinking (Ketch; Langer and Close; Peterson and Eeds). Pookie—quiet, studious, and polite, a role model for her two small daughters—writes thoughtful reflections that capture the richness of her encounters with the text via the various roles:

This week, unlike the other weeks, we were given a worksheet with all the tasks to accomplish. I found this weeks reading more fulfilling because I had to find several things from the reading, which meant, I had to look and analyze everything in the reading. The group discussion this week, I think, was better than past discussions. It was easier to talk about the book because we had to look at it from all aspects. Comparing the one task discussion to the multitask discussion the multitask is better.

Because she uses the word “fulfilling,” I assume that, in comparison, her former reading encounters were perfunctory, passive, and unsatisfying; she felt separated from the experience. The multiple roles help Pookie get inside the text through actively reading and “analyz[ing] everything,” creating a more fully realized and rewarding experience not just on a personal level, but also on a collaborative level when she met with her peers to discuss the text.

The collaborative structure of the Literature Circles makes it harder for students to retreat, challenges their desire for anonymity, and fights indifference. The role sheets integrate students into the textual experience. They may struggle with self-directed and self-generated textual discussions and resist the decentralizing of authority, but ultimately, the Literature Circle is a democratic forum where power is allowed to move freely. Additionally, this low-stakes practice liberates students from high-stakes anxiety and allows them freedom to take risks and be creative with their responses. Desiree’s reflection captured what I hoped would be the heart and soul of the Reading Circle experience in my classes: access to a text; a safe space created within a collaborative classroom; the egalitarianism created within small groups and

the whole class; the tacit permission to openly express distinct responses; and the joy, surprise, and acknowledgement of exposure to the uniqueness of peers' perspective. She says: "The way we interpreted stuff was reflected of our human life. Because it was more understandable that way. Listening to other groups gives you a form of understanding because everyone explains it differently. It a real eye-opener it get ya thinking wow that could have gone that way. It so different from what your yourself see." She recognizes the Reading Circle as a secure space where she and her peers have freedom and power to interpret and share the text from their own perspectives. She also expresses surprise that understandings could be different yet all plausible.

But of course, there was a time or two when not all the students completed the assignment. One instance stands out. Three students came to class with no work. Directed to a few chairs on the side of the room, they were asked to read and complete their task sheets while the rest of the class sat in their Reading Circles in the front of the room. As was the routine, the students (even those who sat by themselves finishing the homework) completed a reflection sheet at the close of the class. On his sheet, John expresses disappointment in himself and the fact that he was not able to be a part of the circle conversations: "Today since I was not able to finish was different. I really didn't enjoy myself as much as when I work in a group. This was something I learned that next time do my work on time. The next time around I hope to be done with my work on time and work with class or group." John knows what he did and finds the consequences unacceptable. He takes ownership of his behavior and claims the authority to change it. He also notes his separation from the community that has evolved, a community he wants to be a part of. All three unprepared students consider the consequences of not doing the homework without offering frivolous excuses. I believe the weekly practice of Reading Circles fosters this sense of agency and responsibility to the collaborative classroom community.

### **Variations on a Theme: Playing with Literature Circles**

After using Reading Circles with McBride's *The Color of Water* for about four weeks, the students were comfortable and chatty and I felt confident enough to shake things up. For one session, I brought Newsprint to class and asked each group to record its responses on the oversized papers, which we would hang around the room. Along with the Newsprint, I offered the groups colored markers and pencils. Like kids in an arts and crafts class, the students fought over which colored marker to use to write their group responses. As

the groups finished discussing and writing, I tacked each piece of Newsprint around the room; each group took turns reading their responses. I began to wrap up the class when Kay, who had become class ringleader, cheerleader, and most passionate participant, waved his hands in the air and chanted, “Hol’ up! Hol’ up! Put your hands in the a-a-a-y-a-a-a-hhh. Put your Rollies in the -a-a-y-a-a-a-hhh. Read that last line, Miss. You forgot to read that last line.” Attempting to wrap up the class, I had not read the last response. Kay caught me. No one was going to be given short shrift: all responses had to be shared. The students had become committed to each other and the Reading Circle as a complete process.

Mixing it up once again, I had each Reading Circle group act as a panel and lead a whole class discussion. I polled students about the one role they wanted; they completed their individual task sheets, discussed the text with their groups, and filled out a group task sheet. I typed up the group responses and made class copies. In the following session, each panel representing one role from the task sheets led a class discussion of its findings. Kay volunteered to emcee the event. He called each group to the front of the classroom, wrote the members’ names on the board, introduced each student, distributed the group sheets, and moderated the panel discussions.

Another week, the students took the lead to change things. They wanted to stay together and discuss the reading as a whole class. Their eagerness to discuss the text as a whole group and the passion with which their discussion flowed was, I believe, a direct result of a routine and predictable employment of Reading Circles and the collaborative community that had subsequently flourished. Discussion director questions, literary luminary passages, and content connector findings were bouncing around the room. I turned on the tape recorder.

In the recording, Kay notes McBride’s gratitude toward his mother and proclaims appreciation for his own mother, says that he is going to go home and give her a hug, and asks the class if they, too, connect. Svetlana scrunches her face, “I really respectful for other people have really different times. I’m a mother also. She went to put her children to college and did good job. Maybe I can too.” Most amazing, however, are the connections Ciano, a young Mexican man, makes. “I am a father and it’s a way to think back to what my mother did for me. I used to live in shacks. When I grew up, I hung out on corners. I went to college, dropped out. I think about to respect to another. I think twice about my mother. She used to hit with belts. My mother had pressure like a nail bent. What did Zora say?” Here, Ciano is making a connection to the “nail bent” metaphor in the final paragraph



of Zora Neale Hurston's "How It Feels To Be Colored Me." Noting Ruth McBride's pressure of single-handedly raising her twelve children, Ciano links her experience to that of his own mother and her pressures in raising children; both were like nails "bent under the weight of things too heavy for any nail" (246). I wonder if I had asked, in a typical teacher-centered discussion, about the pressure Ruth McBride's felt, would Ciano have made a connection between Ruth McBride and his own mother and Zora Neale Hurston? Maybe. Would he have articulated both mothers' experiences using Hurston's metaphor had he not engaged in a Reading Circle and had the task of content connector? Probably not.

As the recorded discussion continues to unfold, Kanatian, a shy, quiet African American girl whom I don't think ever spoke during class discussions makes a comment about McBride's subtitle: *A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother*. Ciano again erupts, "I'm a blaxican," making a connection with Richard Rodriguez's *Los Angeles Times* piece, "It's Not All Black and White," where he urges people to answer race questions on official documents by checking "yes" to every box, and as an example, describes a young girl of mixed black and Mexican heritage who calls herself a "blaxican." Ciano connects to McBride's mixed heritage. Later, I learn that Ciano is married to a white Irish woman and his children, too, are bi-racial. Ciano's connections between the different texts and between texts and his life exemplify deep comprehension. Research tells us that comprehension involves not simply what students know about a text, but what they are thinking about a text. Ciano's ideas were stimulated by his background knowledge along with personal and textual connections. These meta-cognitive strategies emerged through a routine commitment to Reading Circle discussions and task sheets. All the students were continually engaged in making compelling connections that genuinely concerned them.

### **Putting It All Together: Reading Circles and Writing for Assessment**

Research points to the fact that reading and writing are connected; they overlap and share many cognitive processes for constructing meaning (Shanahan). Robert J. Tierney and P. David Pearson posit that reading and writing processes are similar, as both are means of composing meaning. But developmental readers, for whom the reading process is often a high-stakes enterprise of hunting for pre-determined, "correct" answers, do not always understand reading as a process, a dynamic activity similar to writing. Nor do they fully grasp that readers are meant to construct meaning as they

comprehend and interpret a text similar to the way writers construct meaning as they engage in the process of writing a text (Spivey). As an apparatus that supports reading as a process, the Literature Circle can serve as a middle ground connecting the two, integrating both reading and writing as a means for interaction with a text and the construction of meaning.

The Literature Circle discussion supports reading as a drafting process similar to the drafting process in writing. Through collaboration and dialogic inquiries, my students' reading was fostered as they constructed, negotiated, and renegotiated meaning; clarified, supported, and defended interpretations; gained awareness of new perspectives; returned to the text and pushed past comfortable spaces. The task sheets I provided offered students a plan, activating prior knowledge and narrowing goals into specific tasks as they interacted personally with the text. Student responses on task sheets were first reads of the text, similar to a first draft of an essay. The Reading Circle group discussions offered my students an environment to revise meaning and monitor their work. A structured reflection sheet supported my students' sense of agency as they pondered, refined, and extended their responses to discussions, revising their ideas. In the circle discussions, students had to collectively construct knowledge for an audience of their peers and, as a result, their acts of reading moved beyond the space where texts are vessels from which students extract, spew, and promptly forget information and became acts of dynamic composition.

The reading-writing connection could not have more palpable than it was during our preparations for the high-stakes midterm and final exam essays required for assessment. I positioned Reading Circles as a pre-requisite for the students' reading-based exam essays. The midterm exam was an in-class essay I designed based on the text we were reading in class. As was our routine, students completed task sheets on the reading in preparation for the in-class essay. The group and whole class discussions were lively and students were excited to share their ideas. I watched as students actually took notes on their classmates' ideas.

In his reflection, JJ explains how the Reading Circles connected his reading to the writing he would be doing: "It helps a lot when we prepare for the essay in class. It makes things very clear and makes the essay more easy to write. Doing all the task sheets helps you think and gives you answers. It is like support for our essay. We won't be stuck writing the essay because we have all this back up work that will guide us through the essay." He identifies the task sheets as a way to get him thinking and ready for the upcoming essay, subtly equating them to pre-writing or a first draft. He also expresses the security

of having the task sheet information, which would guide him and not leave him stranded with nothing to write. Like many of the students, however, JJ still approached the task sheets as answers. This thinking is deeply rooted, perhaps especially during exam times. I often saw students begin to write, stop suddenly, and ask me, "Is this right, Miss?"

Crystal also found the group and class discussion beneficial for preparing for the midterm essay. She realized the discussions had given her the opportunity to grow or revise her ideas:

As I sat in my group, we discuss what the author is saying. I read through the chapter but never took the time to visualize the quote so I would say it help me, now I have more information for my in class essay tomorrow to discuss. By me listening to other groups it help me to build information on my essay. Every time we discuss it helps me to get a better understanding of how I think among my peers.

Most astonishing is her closing remark. She had begun to examine and evaluate her own ideas in the context, not of the teacher's viewpoint, but of her peers' ideas. The place of authority had changed from the teacher to a self among peers as Crystal took control of her process.

These reflections demonstrate how the Reading Circle experience shifted my students' perspective by way of the tangible connections they were making between their reading, discussions, and what they needed to write for their in-class essay. So often, students substitute summary for analytical discussions of ideas. Finally, they seemed to grasp the concept of developing ideas through interactive textual analysis.

Overall, the students did quite well on their midterm essays. Midterm essays were cross-read in my portfolio cohort, where teachers use a rubric to provide written feed back but no grades (letter grades are given only at the end of the term). My students received positive comments from readers. Their essays were rich with information about and responses to the characters, events, and quotations from the text.

The strategies for textual interpretation fostered throughout the semester in the students' Reading Circles were further exhibited in our class discussions of the final exam reading selection. The final exam consisted of four short-answer questions and one essay question based on a short reading. Students got the reading in advance, were encouraged to annotate and discuss the reading with peers during class time (without teacher interference), and brought their annotated copies of the reading to the exam. Like

they did for each reading, the students completed task sheets based on the final exam text. I typed their seventeen discussion director questions and four literary luminary passages. I did not pair up or group people together because, by this time, the students had formed a community. They sat in a few haphazardly created circles, talking back and forth within their circles and yelling over to others. Every so often, Kay would step to the board and write down what he thought was an important point as the students chatted, working diligently to answer the discussion director questions and explicate the literary luminary passages. I had seen an advance copy of the final exam. The similarities between the students' abilities to read a text and articulate salient questions and the actual teacher-created questions astounded me. My students were able to anticipate the kinds of essay prompts that would appear on the exam with a great deal of accuracy and showed a high level of competence in extracting the significant passages, concepts, and supporting data, which would allow them to respond more fully on the exam. The task sheets generated a level of discourse that served as groundwork for students' formal written work, "provid[ing] a format for students to rehearse the sorts of arguments that ultimately underlie successful written literary analysis and interpretation" (Knoeller 12). Their overall results affirmed that the Reading Circle model should be in the catalogue of low-stakes but highly effective reading activities for developmental English college students. Out of the twenty students in my developmental reading and writing class, 75% of the students passed the college's reading placement exam. Four students advanced to Freshman English, fifteen bypassed the next level of developmental English and advanced to a test-prep intervention for the institution's exit exam, five advanced to the next level of developmental English, and only one student had to repeat the course. In the two developmental reading and writing classes I taught prior to this particular class, I noted only a 30% and 50% pass rate on the reading placement exam.

The principles supported by Literature Circles exemplify best practices in reading such as the seven strategies for reading comprehension (Pearson et al.)<sup>5</sup>; the thirteen core understandings about reading and learning to read (Braunger and Lewis)<sup>6</sup>; and the five characteristics essential to effective writing (Tierney and Pearson).<sup>7</sup> This model for collaborative reading is recognized as successful practice in the elementary school classroom, and its positive academic and literacy benefits have been well documented. Students have been found to have a deeper and more critical understanding of texts (DaLie; Dillon; Samway and Whang) and an increased motivation and engagement in reading and discussing texts (Holt and Bell; Stein and Beed). Research on bilingual

elementary students (Martinez-Roldan and Lopez-Robertson) reveals that, when guided with Literature Circles, bilingual children are able to express themselves and engage in rich textual conversations. More recently, studies have focused on using Literature Circles with adult EFL learners in Taiwan (Sai and Hsu), adult L2 learners in Malaysia (Yahya and Rahim), and adult ESL learners in the States (Kim). Preliminary findings suggest the Literature Circle is a promising approach for discussion and comprehension of texts among these populations. And studies are beginning to emerge about the use of online Literature Circles (Walters; Wolsey). Furthermore, in addition to the literacy gains, participating in a Literature Circle has been identified as a valuable tool for special needs students, augmenting their self-perceptions as readers, their self-esteem, and their self-confidence (Blum et al.; Pitman). From a sociological perspective, participating in Literature Circles has been found to positively impact the social and leadership skills of a cohort of at-risk elementary school students (Sportsman et al.).

With all this said, simply employing Literature Circles in the developmental English college classroom does not mean students will abandon their multiple-choice test taking strategies. In fact, they may still approach reading as a fact-finding expedition and each text as a discreet enterprise disengaged from other texts, themselves, and their lived experiences. Literature Circles may not guarantee higher order thinking, deeper comprehension, and better scores on standardized exams. Students may not necessarily be motivated to do reading assignments. But we need to provide our basic writing students with a framework and apparatus to nurture an affirmative relationship with texts, enable them to develop a sense of agency, and invite them to engage in grand conversations with a text and each other (Peterson and Eeds 10-14). How Literature Circles are adapted for a community college developmental English classroom depends on a teacher's commitment to and understanding of the model, a continuous routine effort along with a flexible implementation, and recognition of the needs and requirements of the students. Teaching this particular class for so many years offered me the experience, confidence, and knowledge to adapt the model while not losing sight of the overall objectives and demands of the course.

As we learn from the NEA report *To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence*, reading and literacy levels are linked to teenage drop-out rates, employment, and wages. Literacy is also linked to involvement in social and civic activities such as attending theater, concerts, museums, and sporting events; exercising and health; volunteering; and voting. Most developmental reading and writing students are already situated on the

fringes of college, often denied entrance into credit-bearing courses until standardized tests are passed, or placed in a continuing education setting with contingent faculty until all standardized measures are successfully completed. These students are, of course, most at risk to drop out of school. If we want students to engage in their communities and society, we first have to engage them in the classroom, keep them in school, and see them graduate. Research has shown that students who are actively engaged in the classroom, with their course work, their peers, and their teachers are more likely to grow academically and socially. We want to move our students to a place where they are involved in, responsible for, and in control of their learning both inside and outside the classroom. The Literature Circle is one apparatus for engaging students in reading and writing, one method for affecting life-long literacy.

## Notes

1. See, for instance, Bartholomae and Petrosky; Charlton; Deming; Dickson; Henry; Morrow; Salvatori; and Zamel. Although these are but a few names of the many who have for years been investigating reading in the composition classroom, reading still needs to be a greater part of the conversation in basic writing and composition studies.

2. For a sampling of classroom studies see Angeletti; Sportsman et al.; Gilbert; King, Raphael, and McMahon; Samway et al. and others mentioned throughout text.

3. Seminal works include Hill, Johnson, and Schlick Noe; Peterson and Eeds; Schlick Noe and Johnson; and Short, Harste, and Burke.

4. For a discussion and illustration of the various and multi-level teacher roles in Literature Circles see “‘Teacher Watching’: Examining Teacher Talk in Literature Circles,” Short, Kaufman, Kaser, Kahn, and Crawford.

5. Seven Reading Comprehension Strategies: 1. Activating background knowledge to make connections between new and known information. 2. Questioning the text. 3. Drawing inferences. 4. Determining importance. In the sea of words that is any text, readers must continually sort through and prioritize information. 5. Creating mental images. 6. Repairing understanding when meaning breaks down. 7. Synthesizing information.

6. Thirteen core understandings about reading and learning to read: 1. Reading is a construction of meaning from text. It is an active, cognitive, and affective process. 2. Background knowledge and prior experience are critical to the reading process. 3. Social interaction is essential at all stages of reading development. 4. Reading and writing are reciprocal processes; development of one enhances the other. 5. Reading involves complex thinking. 6. Environments rich in literacy experiences, resources, and models facilitate reading development. 7. Engagement in the reading task is key in successfully learning to read and developing as a reader. 8. Children's understandings of print are not the same as adults' understandings. 9. Children develop phonemic awareness and knowledge of phonics through a variety of literacy opportunities, models, and demonstrations. 10. Readers learn productive strategies in the context of real reading. 11. Students learn best when teachers employ a variety of strategies to model and demonstrate reading knowledge, strategy, and skills. 12. Students need many opportunities to read, read, read. 13. Monitoring the development of reading processes is vital to student success.

7. The five characteristics are planning, drafting, aligning, revising, and monitoring.

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**Appendix A: Role Worksheets (renamed Task Sheets)**

**DISCUSSION DIRECTOR**

Your job is to develop a list of questions that your group might want to discuss about this part of the book. Don't worry about small details: Your task is to help people in your group talk over the big ideas in the reading and share reactions. Notice what you are wondering/asking yourself while you are reading and write down some of those questions along the way. For example, perhaps you were wondering about some of the following questions:

What messages the author is trying to get across to his audience?

Why something happened?

Why someone did something?

What was going to happen next?

**LITERARY LUMINARY**

Your job is to locate a few special sections or quotations from the text for your group to talk over. In other words, what passage really stands out for you? What is interesting? Powerful? Confusing? Copy the passage and explain why you picked it and what you think it means.

SOME PLACES I FOUND WORTH GOING BACK TO:

<b>PAGE # / PARAGRAPH</b>	<b>REASON FOR PICKING</b>

**CONNECTOR**

Your job is to find connections between the material your group is reading and the world outside. This means connecting the reading to your own life, to happenings at school or in your community, to stories in the news, to similar events at other times and places, to other people or problems that you are reminded of. There are no right answers!!

Whatever connections you make are worth writing down and sharing.

SOME CONNECTIONS I FOUND BETWEEN THIS READING AND OTHER PEOPLE, PLACES, EVENTS, AUTHORS, MOVIES... (Please write below)

**SUMMARIZER**

Your job is to prepare a brief summary of today’s reading. The other members of your group will be counting on you to give a quick (one or two minute) statement that conveys the **KEY POINTS, MAIN HIGHLIGHTS, THE ESSENCE** of today’s reading.

**CHARACTER COORDINATOR**

Your task is to choose 2 characters you wish to examine. Identify key passages that provide insight into the characters’ personalities, values, beliefs, etc. Write the passage and discuss what you think it tells us about the character.

i. CHARACTER \_\_\_\_\_

<b>PAGE # / PASSAGE</b>	<b>WHAT DOES THIS PASSAGE TELL YOU ABOUT THE CHARACTER?</b>

**WORD WIZARD**

Your task is to look out for new words. When you find words that are unfamiliar, puzzling, or difficult to read write them down in the chart below. Try to figure out what the word means from the context in which it is used. Write down your guess. Then use a dictionary to obtain the real meaning. Also look for words that are repeated a lot, or a common word that is used in an unusual way, or a word that seems to be important to the meaning of the text.

NEW WORDS

<b>WORD</b>	<b>PAGE/ PARAGRAPH</b>	<b>MY GUESS</b>	<b>DEFINITION</b>
I.			

These task sheets are adapted from Harvey Daniels’s Role Sheets in *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom*.

## **Appendix B: Reflection Sheet**

### **REFLECTIONS**

Take this time to reflect on your reading and your group discussions. Use this page and the back if needed to describe your experience today.

- Describe your experience reading the assigned chapters with a specific task to complete.
- How did performing your assigned task affect the way you read the book?
- How did using the task sheets help / not help your reading?
- Explain why this task was / wasn't difficult.
- Describe your experience discussing your findings with your group.
- How did your group decide its answers? Were there disagreements?
- Describe your experience listening to the other groups discuss their findings.