



OPEN WORDS: ACCESS AND ENGLISH STUDIES

Vol. 12, No. 1 (December 2019): 88–109

DOI: 10.37514/OPW-J.2019.12.1.05

ISSN: 2690-3911 (Print) 2690-392X (Online)

<https://wac.colostate.edu/openwords/>

Literature Circles: Access to Texts

Ronna J. Levy, Ph.D.

CUNY Kingsborough Community College

ABSTRACT

In our classrooms and in the scholarship, we understand our students' inabilities and struggles to read the way we expect because for many, the reading process is elusive. This article examines the effectiveness of Harvey Daniels's literature circles, a student-centered and collaborative approach used primarily in the lower grades, as a tool for accessing the reading process and accessing texts. Levy reviews how this pedagogical model with its structured, scaffolded role sheets, which frame the literature circle discussions provides useful approaches for entering and navigating challenging textual material. Levy demonstrates how this methodology provides the infrastructure and guides students through the practices of annotation, reflection, discussion, and supports reading as a process paralleling the writing process.

What's Yoga Got to Do with Reading?

Over a decade ago, I tried a beginning yoga class. The instructor started; the class followed. The instructor began, saying something about “sits bones” (I had no idea what she was talking about), then contorted her body through a sun salutation, and fluidly moved through a series of poses. I tried my best to follow, intently watching the instructor's body, listening to the names of the poses, while at the same time trying to watch my arms and legs, which felt disconnected from my body, defining their own movements. I missed most of the poses. I was confused and lost, but I tried to keep up with the other students. Happily, for me, the instructor repeated her process, moving gracefully, naming poses. At one point, she walked around the room, gently repositioning an arm, a leg, correcting and praising. Ultimately, I could not follow and figure out how to move. What was most frustrating was that I could not do simple

Open Words: Access and English Studies is an open-access, peer-review scholarly journal, published on the WAC Clearinghouse and supported by Colorado State University. Articles are published under a Creative Commons BY-NC-ND license (Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs).

ISSN: 2690-3911 (Print) 2690-392X (Online).

poses. What was most embarrassing was my inability to keep up with the class. After the class, I spoke to the teacher about my difficulties and insecurities. She told me to keep at it; I would eventually figure it out. I kept at it for approximately five weeks. However, my frustration and a feeling of low esteem were too great; I threw in the yoga mat and never went back.

At the outset, I was proud of myself for trying yoga, doing something new and beneficial, and looking forward to being able to practice yoga on my own, anytime, anywhere. However, all those positive feelings waned the longer I remained in class. I did what my teacher said; I kept at it; however, I was never able to figure out the poses on my own. I needed a pathway into yoga, a deliberate break down of poses so that I could eventually repeat the practice on my own, enjoy different yoga classes, and feel accomplished.

I think about my students in my urban community college many of whom are under-prepared for the challenges of the college classroom, particularly when comes to reading texts. When they cannot access a text, they may experience the same frustration as I did with yoga, eventually giving up and disappearing. My yoga instructor did not offer me help or a deliberate break down of poses. She assumed that with tenacious practice, I would eventually get it. And, indeed, I may well have at some point “gotten it.” However, our students struggle to “get it.” They lack the confidence and strategies to push through a text. And eventually they stop trying.

Alice Horning who has written prolifically about students’ struggles with college-level reading offers this definition of college reading: “College level academic reading can be defined as a complex, recursive process in which readers actively and critically understand and create meaning through connections to texts” (7). I contend that before students can become active readers and critically understand and create meaning, they need to enter a text. This article illustrates how Harvey Daniels’s literature circle methodology is a framework whose features offer students a variety of strategies for entering and navigating a text. More specifically, the literature circle role sheets access a road map for annotation and reflection; a vehicle for promoting conversations; and a model that supports reading as a process, paralleling the writing process.

Literature Circles: What Are They?

Literature circles, grounded in collaborative learning, reader-response criticism, and independent reading offer a reading methodology, which provides access to useful strategies and approaches as students tackle challenging textual material in the

classroom. This methodology provides a flexible model of peer-led literature discussion groups evolved out of the elementary school classrooms in the 1980s, pioneered by Becky Abraham Searle and Karen Smith and expanded by Jeremy Harste, Kathy Short and Carolyn Burke. According to Harvey Daniels, “Literature circles embody the idea that kids learn to read mainly by reading and to write mainly by writing and by doing so in a supportive, literate community” (24).

The literature circles methodology is predicated on fostering textual interaction and thoughtful discussion. Instilling a sense of control over learning, the role sheets, which Daniels likens to training wheels, provide temporary support to help students interact with a text and to intentionally frame their textual discussions. The roles sheets are a series of structured, scaffolded exercises designed to encourage a transactional reading experience, by cultivating a variety of positions in relation to texts and providing an efficient plan for narrowing goals into manageable parts. The task of completing these role sheets gives students an immediate purpose and focus for reading beyond information gathering or being correct. Completing the role sheets also fosters students’ comprehension, encourages critical reading, and lessens students’ frustration and disappointment when tackling challenging material.

This methodology can also introduce students to the process of reading as an ongoing activity that continues to develop through all levels of education. This methodology can help bring confidence to students as they begin to see themselves as readers, in addition to writers. And finally, this methodology can encourage self-reflection. As students engage in the role sheet reading tasks, they are engaging in metacognition. Shepherded through an active and conscious reading, students become more mindful, more aware of their process, more aware of what they know, do not know, want to know, and need to know.

The Classroom

My students tend to be non-traditional, the first in their families to attend college, the returning adults, the GED graduates, the immigrants, and the products of local high schools. They are proud to attend college, hopeful that an education will change their futures. But many arrive at college already carrying negative academic experiences and a host of affective, cultural, social, economic, and behavioral issues. Furthermore, they lack an understanding of the discourse and expectations of the academy, particularly for reading texts. They lack the skills for approaching and negotiating a text and reflecting on their process. There is a growing body of literature, focusing on these struggles and students’ lack of preparedness for college level reading, particularly their

difficulty with reading deeply and critically to achieve a more nuanced level of comprehension.

About two decades ago, I was frustrated with how my University-labeled “academically underprepared” community college students read (or did not read), their poor comprehension, and their lack of class discussion. I followed the Initiate-Respond-Evaluate (IRE) routine where teacher Initiates a question; student Responds, teacher Evaluates. I asked the product question, eliciting a factual response. I did not know how to ask the process question, eliciting interpretation and opinion. Initially, my classroom technique was encouraging students to remain in what Rosenblatt calls the efferent stance, that end of the continuum where the reader searches for information, something to extract from the text as opposed to the aesthetic stance, the other end of the continuum where the reader is experiencing feelings, moods, and impressions (22-30). Literature circles methodology helped me change.

“Literature circles have the potential to make kids both more responsible for and more in control of their own education,” claims Harvey Daniels (31). When students perceive a lack of control over their learning, when classroom occurrences are tainted with negative experiences and failure, and students do not know how to approach the work, we lose them. Literature circles provides a methodology to give students access to texts, assignments, and discussions, and is a step toward helping students take responsibility and be in control of their learning.

Reading Practices

If we consider historically how students have been inculcated to read a text, we can begin to understand a bit about why our students struggle to read, as we would like. For well over a century, typical classroom practices for reading instruction have situated students in an efferent stance, hunting for information to extract from the reading. Ellen C. Carillo offers a brief look at the evolution of reading in colleges. Dating back to the nineteenth century, reading was recitation, where articulation, elocution, and inflection were stressed. “Because the performance, or ‘art of reading,’ as it was called by many textbooks, trumped an understanding of the content, the materials printed in the readers were often redacted or taken out of context since their primary purpose had little to do with meaning” (48). In the late 1930s, there was the static view of the reader purported by the New Critical approach, placing the text in the foreground, where the history, author’s intent, and reader’s interpretations are immaterial; all meaning lives in the text. In the 1970s, Durkin observed classroom interactions and discovered that teachers engaged in what she termed “comprehension

assessment” where the teacher simply asked questions or created a writing assignment to assess students’ reading, confusing “comprehension instruction” with “comprehension assessment” (490-524). As a result, students were being programmed to mine a text for answers to be deposited on worksheets or assessments, particularly multiple-choice assessments, continuing the belief that all meaning resided in the text. Ensuing class discussions were often a matter of going over the worksheets and/or assessments. Classroom talk was often teacher centered: constructed, initiated, and sometimes even answered by the teacher; questions were designed to elicit literal, memorized, or yes or no responses, thus students’ responses were brief and students rarely initiated questions or questioned the teacher. In the early 1980s, Smith and Feathers set out to determine the necessity and function of reading in four middle school social studies classes, finding a lack of focus on reading instruction for comprehension. Rather reading involved the acquisition of information to be deposited on worksheets and tests. Moreover, they found that students could gather the needed information without reading entire assignments (264-266). The 1985 NEAP report attributed poor critical reading skills to inadequate class discussions about assigned reading and revealed the need for greater student participation in the construction of meaning. These NEAP findings prompted Alvermann and Hayes to observe the classroom discussion practices in five high school classrooms, both English and traditional content classes in rural Georgia. Not surprisingly, they discovered that classroom discussions resembled the Initiate-Respond-Evaluate where the teacher asked detail questions eliciting factual and brief answers, maintaining a teacher-centered environment. Teachers seldom invited interpretive responses, discouraging students’ individual points of view; and students seldom questioned their peers or the teacher, keeping the teacher as the authority (305-331). If this has been the reading experience for students in their schooling, then, of course, there will be a disconnect between the reading expectations in public schools and the reading expectations in college.

This disconnect of reading expectations between secondary educators and college educators is well documented. The 2009 *ACT National Curriculum Survey* notes: “Across content areas, about two thirds of high school teachers reported that more than half of their students were ready to read college-level material in their content area” (25). On the other hand, “Approximately one third of postsecondary instructors responded that most students arrive ready to read in their content area” (25). Five years later, the 2016 *ACT National Curriculum Survey* shared similar results. College instructors found entering students were lacking in the preparation of the reading skills needed. The lack of preparation and difference in expectations plays out in our

classrooms when our students struggle.

The middle and secondary school classrooms are not the only places that have contributed to students' belief that the purpose of reading is to glean information for assessment purposes only. More than two decades after Durkin's findings, Medina's 2001 research of adult literacy courses found that the teachers were still employing this comprehension assessment method through classroom practices of IRE, skill and drill worksheets (2). Echoing a point made by Smith and Feathers (1980s) who observed that reading the texts was not always necessary to be successful, we find that not much has changed. In 2008, Jolliffe and Harl investigated students' reading habits using questionnaires, journals, and interviews. Their general observations about the state of student reading include: "Professors admit that students can actually pass exams if they come to lectures and take (or buy) good notes, whether or not they have read the assigned material. In short, careful reading seems have [sic] become a smaller blip on the higher educational radar screen or dropped off it altogether" (600). Similarly, Del Principe and Ihara conducted a longitudinal study, examining the reading experiences of five students at a public urban community college. Their findings revealed that some classes did not require any reading in a text; even when classes did require a text, much of the class material was covered via lecture or power point, making the text ultimately superfluous; and sometimes professors did not seem to even care if students read the assigned material. So, if students' classroom reading experiences range from reading for answers in a teacher-centered classroom, reading for assessment, or not reading at all, then, of course, they will struggle to read as we expect.

Reading: The Struggles

Reading struggles are not new. Monica Wyatt offers an historical context for students' complex relationship to reading and the need to create programs and courses that assist the underprepared student with reading, dating back to the early 1800s. In the early 1900s, William Gray highlighted studies that identified the underlying causes of college students' reading struggles as related to vocabulary, reading speed, and cognitive abilities, in addition to the students' level of maturity and their "inappropriate attitudes, ineffective habits of thinking while reading" (358). Nancy Wood described her mid-1950s students' struggles with reading speed and comprehension. Today's literature reflects similar observations, studies, and details of students' struggles with college reading, their attitudes toward reading, their lack of motivation, the necessity (or lack) of reading in order to succeed in a class, in addition to examinations of how reading as a process and outcome are addressed in the college classroom. Each

discipline, course, and teacher require different types, quantities, and tasks with respect to reading. But, whatever the requirements for different professors, classes, and areas of study, the refrain persists. Students cannot read as we expect they should be able to when they reach our college classrooms.

In the introduction to *What Is College Reading?* Alice Horning, who has written extensively about student reading, explains that students do not read the type of expository reading expected in college; they will not read unless there is some reward attached; they cannot read the way we expect them to read in our college classrooms. (8). She calls for a variety of ways to address this reading issue, including the creation of reading across the curriculum programs, that reading be taught in every class, that assignments challenge students to engage with texts, and that students are guided into becoming more mindful readers.

If reading and writing work together as modes of learning, then, naturally, students' weaknesses in reading surface in their writing. They struggle to write because they struggle to read. I have read many essays where students plagiarize, and I do not mean they buy an essay on the internet and give me a polished piece of writing. Rather, they cobble together sentences from different pages, or they string together words from different sentences, or they do what Rebecca Howard calls "patchwriting," defined as "reproducing source language with some words deleted or added, some grammatical structures altered, or synonyms used" (181). Students resort to this fractured writing because they are stranded at the sentence level. Their reading is slow and uncertain, lacking a sense of fluency and the necessary mental representations in order to understand the text as a whole. Consequently, their relationship to a text is in bits and pieces. When their reading comprehension remains at the sentence level of a text, then students search only for sentences to incorporate into their writing. The well-known Citation Project has documented students' struggles in summarizing, paraphrasing, and quoting sources in their writing, demonstrating their lack of comprehension, critical thinking, and ability to synthesize. Furthermore, because students remain tangled in their sentences, they are not able to move deeply into the text, which means their textual references are derived from the first few pages of a text. Mary Lou Odom's study of WAC faculty's experiences with assignments that depended on students' reading yielded disappointing results: "students' lack of 'in-depth' reading," to students who "struggle" to carry out 'critical assessment' pertaining to course readings," to students who "lacked 'the ability to read a paper critically'" (260). Chris Anson investigates students reading for the mundane assessment to reading for thoughtfully and creatively designed writing to read assignments that contain clearly articulated goals and purposes for reading. If we consider this history

of reading practices and reading struggles, we should consider the literature circle model to be incorporated into the college classroom as a method to address students' reading struggles.

Literature Circles: Access

I go back to my yoga experience. The yoga classes were my opportunity to engage in the practice and become part of the yoga community, to be competent enough to join my peers at yoga retreats, and to feel comfortable to join in a yoga class anywhere I traveled. But, as I described earlier, I struggled, having to tangible access to the poses, nothing to anchor me. I became frustrated and humiliated, losing all hope that I would ever be capable enough to participate in the practice and community, and I quit. I needed the instructor to move my body, positioning me while she looked on, so I could know what my body felt like, reflect upon what my body was doing, and look to her when I needed a guide. Authentic assistance may have given me access to confidence. And with confidence, I may have trusted myself to keep trying even if I stumbled. But I had nothing substantial to support me. My self-esteem sank. I did not trust my skills. I did not have confidence, the confidence to persist.

Many students lack confidence and trust in themselves as readers. They consider reading a linear, passive experience, not a recursive, active process that requires them to read and reread, critically engage with a text, evaluate ideas, press through complexities, synthesize, make connections, and identify relationships within the context of a whole. Additionally, they lack the tools and the experience of sustained practice that can help them stumble through uncertainty and allow a text to unfold. As a result, their familiar stance is 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. Literature circles can arrange the infrastructure, cultivate students as active readers, provide access to texts, and begin to build the confidence necessary for them to keep going.

Employing literature circles and role sheets can offer the first step in transporting students inside the text where they are comfortable moving around. The role sheets guide students to focus on one role while reading and give students entry into significant textual experiences they might, otherwise, not be able to access. The literature circle discussions access meaning making among the students; invite them to question one another, ask for clarification, explanation or evidence from the text; and encourage students to support and defend their ideas and interpretations. The discussions offer students opportunities to synthesize material from a variety of perspectives. Consequently, students' listening, speaking, and reading proficiencies are

encouraged in their groups as they have the time to elaborate, express, and negotiate their points of view through questioning, clarifying, explaining, defending, elaborating, expressing ideas and interpretations before an audience of peers, as opposed the typical teacher to student exchange that excludes other students.

In literature circles, there are no quizzes, tests, answers, nothing to memorize, no right or wrong. Students are given the freedom to read without assessment pressure. They are given permission and encouraged to question, to be confused, and to get lost. They are inspired to collaborate with their peers to construct deeper meanings of texts.

Sustained practice, employing these roles and subsequent circle discussions, offer students the access for comprehension. If we regularly repeat *comprehension assessment* via multiple-choice exercises, quizzes, tests, Q and A worksheets and not *comprehension instruction*, and if our usual classroom model is to assign pages for homework, go over the assigned pages in the following class, and move on, then we cannot expect students to comprehend a text as we would like.

Furthermore, sustained practice of this methodology promotes the development of the habits of mind, the foundations of academic success. Habits of mind are behaviors and attitudes toward just about everything we do, particularly when we encounter obstacles. Fostering habits of mind will provide students with self-assurance as they navigate their coursework and the academy. Arthur Costa's *Learning and Leading with Habits of Mind: 16 Essential Characteristics for Success* and *The Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*, developed by Council of Writing Program Administrators, National Council of Teachers of English, and National Writing Project detail mindful learning behaviors that are vital for success, behaviors which can be attributed to reading. Costa offers these behaviors as learning outcomes, not in the traditional sense of what students should know upon completing a course. Rather he posits the habits of mind are behaviors students exhibit when they are having trouble completing a course. Students need these behaviors to access and support their learning. Many of the habits listed in the both documents overlap and intersect so that it is difficult to illustrate in a one-to-one comparison how a role sheet encourages a particular habit of mind. Here are a few examples: Responding to texts using the low-stakes role sheets encourages *creativity, risk-taking, openness, and applying past knowledge to new situations*. Sharing their thoughts with peers in the literature circle conversation challenges students to *communicate with clarity, listen and understand with empathy, be open, think flexibly and interdependently*. Considering the responses from their peers gives students the opportunity *to reflect and think about their thinking*. The experience of

completing role sheets and having circle discussions exposes existing ineffective behaviors and nurtures habits of mind that will better serve the students.

Literature circle roles offer students a pathway in to developing a “rhetorical reading” of a text. Building on the belief that reading is a transaction, Christina Haas and Linda Flower identify the construction of meaning through “‘rhetorical reading,’ an active attempt at constructing a rhetorical context for the text as a way of making sense of it” (168). Novice readers engage in a one-dimensional rhetorical process, building a simple mental representation of the content, decoding words, reading to collect information. By contrast, more experienced readers engage in a complex rhetorical relationship with a text, building a variety of intersecting “private mental representation[s]” (168). These mental representations include not only the content, but also representations that readers build in order to make sense of texts. Readers’ representations may include a consideration of structure and different parts of a text, the author’s point of view, intentions, and purpose; their own personal thoughts, beliefs, and opinions; internal and external connections; mental images; emotional responses, values, and connotations; social implications. As Haas and Flower suggest, students struggle to read critically not because of the representations they build, but because of the representations “they fail to construct” (170). The literature circle roles encourage students to access the construction of a range of mental representations in the service of a deeper and more critical understanding of a text. As we take our cues from a text, our minds are involved in creating many representations at the same time. Moreover, because these roles are flexible, they can be designed so that students are challenged to respond simultaneously to multiple roles, employing multiple representations, and identify relationships within the context of a whole.

Employing literature circles over the years, I have creatively altered these role sheets, varied the ways I group students, abandoned this method, and picked it up again. I have experienced the awkwardness of students when they bring, for the first time, their completed role sheets to their literature circle discussions. While I circulate the room, they wait for me to approve their responses, and I have to gently nudge them to share responses with their peers, not just me. No matter how the literature circles evolve, one element remains essential: Sustained practice using this method is necessary to cultivate the moves of a practiced reader and create discussions that are more authentic. With sustained use of this practice, a community forms when students are actively reading and collaborating in the construction of knowledge in a low-pressure, democratic, open forum. There were times in my class when the routine to complete the role sheets became familiar and organic, to the point where I was able to

Levy

ask students to read their text and complete the role sheets without giving them actual worksheets.

Literature Circles: Annotation

Annotation helps to reify for students the relationship between reading and writing and how knowledge is constructed. This section unpacks how role sheets are a template for annotation and reflection. In a highly structured fashion, the role sheets demonstrate various writing to read activities to complete during a reading of a text.

Students' default method of annotation is a yellow highlighter with a page yellowed with many, if not all, sentences underlined. I often ask students *why* they have highlighted or underlined a particular sentence and the response is invariably the same: "It's important. It's the main idea. I need to know that." When I press further: Why is that sentence important? Why do you need to know that? Students reflexively offer that any given sentence is important and most likely something they need to know for some sort of accountability or assessment.

To move students beyond yellow, the literature circle role sheets usher students through various aspects of annotating: asking questions about the text in general or for the author; contemplating beyond I agree/disagree; identifying passages that are challenging, interesting, and worth rereading; finding and defining new and/or difficult words; accessing prior knowledge, making connections to their own lives and/or other readings; visualizing content and text structure through pictures, maps, charts, or any pictorial that helps to clarify content and structure; and reflecting about what they are thinking and doing as they read, and how they read. I have seen students who barely write anything in the margins; who rewrite the text; who make artwork out of the text, using various highlighter colors and draw circles, arrows, and lines. Writing on the role sheets moves students away from these unproductive practices and guides them toward deeper, engaged reading.

Helping reading teachers teach annotation, Carol Porter-O'Donnell's uses her students' written reflections to demonstrate how annotations helped them understand the text they were reading. One student commented how annotations slowed down his reading, making it "harder to fake read if you have to annotate" (87). This student understood the difference between the kind of "real" reading he should be doing and the kind of "fake" he was doing. I think, however, for many of our students the "fake" reading is their "real" reading. They remain unaware and/or resist another way to read.

Writing on the role sheets slows down the reading process, allows students to use writing as a means to learn, and positions students not only as active readers, but

also mindful readers. A slower reading process allows students to “hear the ‘speaking out loud voice’ in their heads while reading” (Skeans 69). The students’ inner monologues and their role sheets as written dialogues with the author support students as active, thinking, and reflective readers.

The role sheets and literature circle discussions, which encourage multiple interactions with a text encourage reflection. Completing the role sheets, students are expressing their first thoughts about a reading and they are able to reflect on and reconsider those first thoughts through the subsequent literature circle discussions, which resembles a peer review exercise. In a peer-review of their essays, students share their drafts, receive comments, reflect, and revise. In this case with reading a text, the first drafts of the students’ reading are the completed role sheets. The responses on the role sheets are shared with their peers, who, in turn, offer feedback. Students then have opportunity to reflect upon their first thoughts and reread for a deeper understanding, revising their thoughts/drafts with knowledge gained from their peers. The literature circle discussion brings the reflective and reading processes to life. Examining this reflective process, Mills and Jennings videotaped their students’ literature circle discussions so that viewing themselves in action, students could reflect on their learning through their discussions. Their objective: “Students reflected (looked back) and then became reflexive (studied themselves to outgrow themselves)” (59).

Providing guidance for reflection, I ask my students to complete a “Reflection Sheet.” Before I collect the role sheets and reflections for my review, the groups break up, and the class ends, I ask my students to share their reflections with their group, and then we engage in a whole class discussion about their reflections and what it was like sharing their reflections: the act of reflecting on reflection.

Literature Circles: Talk

As we have learned from Dewey’s investigation of traditional and progressive education, the traditional education practice does not encourage students to become active learners and “is unfaithful to the fact that all human experience is ultimately social: that it involves contact and communication” (38). Whereas, engaging in an authentic social experience such as discussion stimulates thinking and reflection, the ingredients for deep reading. Langer’s research points to discussion as an essential element of instruction. Studying students when engaged in small group discussions, Sweigert found positive results with comprehension and writing. Peterson and Eeds saw dialogue as a way for students to negotiate and clarify ideas, in addition to a way

Levy

to encourage patience and respect. In her observations of elementary school students as they discussed texts, Ann Ketch notes, “Without conversation, we are limited to our own insights. With conversation, we can explore and expand our developing thoughts. We construct our own meaning, influenced by the knowledge and experience of others” (12). The social nature and influence of others is at the heart of the literature circle talk.

Literature Circles: The Reading Process and the Writing Process Connected

Students have had so many years of reading and writing practice in primary and secondary school. Yet, for some reason, we do not abandon writing instruction as we abandon reading instruction. We encourage writing through low-stakes writing activities such as journals, freewrites, double-entry notebooks, and so forth to help students think through ideas and construct knowledge. They draft and revise. They engage in the writing process. What has happened to teaching and encouraging the reading process?

Unlike the drafted essay produced for class, reading yields no tangible product. Consequently, students do not recognize that reading involves a process similar to the writing process. The literature tells us that reading and writing are connected, overlap, depend upon, and share many cognitive processes for constructing meaning. Throughout their report “Toward a Composing Model of Reading,” Tierney and Pearson describe how the reading and writing processes are similar, as both are means of composing. Students acknowledge the writing process, as they are active in planning, drafting, peer reviewing, conferencing, revising, and producing a product. What they do not acknowledge is that the reader, like the writer engages in the process of making meaning through the acts of planning, drafting, aligning, revising, and monitoring. They miss the fact that readers construct knowledge as they read the same way writers construct knowledge as they write. For the novice reader, the reading process is elusive and often a high stakes enterprise, particularly if the only moves the students make are to hunt for correct answers.

Literature circles serve a middle ground, accessing the growing and integrating both reading and writing as a means for interaction with a text and the construction of meaning. Loosely following the composing process, the role sheets represent low-stake responses, the students’ first drafts/first reads of a text, where they are writing to learn by asking questions and expressing thoughts and feelings. The literature circle conversation promotes the constructing, negotiating, and renegotiating of meaning; the clarifying, supporting, and defending of interpretations; and developing of an

awareness of new perspectives.

Literature Circles: Access to Multicultural and Culturally Relevant Texts

Our classrooms are diverse culturally and linguistically, and students and teachers need to be sensitive to diversity. Multicultural and culturally relevant literature can be inspiring and can broaden students' knowledge of worlds inhabited by different people, languages, customs, traditions, and political situations. Multicultural and culturally relevant literature also offers students a chance to reflect on their own situations. Additionally, students develop an appreciation for more than the community they inhabit, as they are, indeed, members of a global society. Thus, we have a responsibility to help students possess a deeper knowledge, and empathy for those unlike themselves.

This section highlights how discussing multicultural and culturally relevant literature in literature circles offers students opportunities to access and explore new and different worlds, fostering new perspectives. The various roles activate and acknowledge students' individual circumstances; provide a context as students build upon their knowledge with new information; and promote comprehension by encouraging students to become personally involved with the text. Moreover, exposing students to the diverse lenses of their peers through which a text is viewed not only adds to students' understanding, but also challenges them to reflect, reconsider, re-evaluate what they know and to respect what they do not know.

Research shows that literature circles with multicultural and culturally relevant literature work best when students have a genuine interest and purpose for reading a text or when supplemental scaffolding is employed. The adult readers studied were mature and experienced and the choice to read multicultural and culturally relevant texts using the literature circles was a deliberate choice with a clearly defined purpose. Vaughn et al. used literature circles discussion as a framework and an "entry point for critical discussions" (30) using young adult multicultural texts as a way for rural pre-service teachers to access critical conversations about people, cultures, races, languages, and situations unlike their own. The researchers found that when discussing these texts, pre-service teachers looked at social issues of power and class, and textual discussions were followed with conversations about potential classroom situations when difficult topics might arise and how best to support students. Amy Heineke investigated the value of literature circles as a collaborative mechanism for discussing culturally relevant picture books with teachers and teaching candidates, whose classes are populated with English learners. She discovered that success of the literature circle

Levy

discussion depended on the structure that the reader response (role sheets) provided, and how participants were grouped together. Ultimately, the literature circle discussions with culturally relevant texts provided participants with the means to understand the students' lives, to personally connect with texts, and to address students' individual circumstances. Lori Fredricks used the term Critical Literature Circles for her discussion circles with adult EFL learners in Tajikistan. Her students desired to read texts culturally relevant to their own lives. Their subsequent literature circle discussions centered around connections they made with characters and their social and political situations, in addition to reflecting on the knowledge they gained about how other people handled particular situations; their own prejudices and beliefs; and life lessons. Elizabeth Noll's seventh graders experienced success as they, too, desired to read texts about social issues, including child abuse, censorship, nursing homes, the Vietnam War. Before the literature circle discussions, Noll immersed students in a variety of supplemental activities such as class discussions on particular topics, dialogue journals with Noll, weekly letters to each other. Heather Bruce used literature circles with culturally relevant texts to expose Native American stereotypes and to better understand the culture and contributions. Like Noll, Bruce immersed her students in a series of pre-literature circle discussion activities, including directed research, journaling, and supplemental scaffolding. Thein, Guise, and Sloan found that without supplemental scaffolding, a group of tenth graders who read *Bastard Out of Carolina*, remained on topic and discussed their texts; however, their talk lacked critical examinations of social issues presented and any observations of characters and issues remained on the surface. The traditional role sheets did not cultivate critical stances to larger social and political themes, nor did they encourage changes in students' thinking about any issues. Researchers suggested a redesign of roles to challenge students' ways of thinking about multicultural, social, and political issues raised in texts. Sometimes, in their most rudimentary form, literature circles will not provide the desired access to discussions and analysis. Supplemental activities and a redesign of the role sheets will be needed.

Literature Circles: The Classroom

I return to my yoga analogy. I was expected to breathe a certain way, clear my mind, and pose. When I expressed despair, my instructor advised me to stick with it, and I would eventually figure it out. I stuck with it for a while, and I did not ever figure it out. In the college class, students are expected to read a variety of texts, to actively and deeply engage with the complexities of a text, to analyze, interpret, evaluate, synthesize,

and apply knowledge. When they express despair, we pretty much know they will not figure it out on their own. I needed access to yoga; students need access to texts. Before students can comfortably and deeply engage with texts, they need the process to be slowed, have reading moves broken down, offered scaffolding to make the moves, and be allowed to practice each move before being expected to analyze, interpret, evaluate, synthesize, apply knowledge and perform the complete reading routine. The framework and underlying objectives and goals of literature circles can offer our students that entrée into texts through annotation, repetition, conversation, reflection, and appreciation that reading is a process like writing.

However, literature circles do not provide a panacea. Instructors need to know that this practice takes time and persistence, and at times creativity. Sometimes, the lack of assessment and the informal low-stakes nature of the literature circle model is unfamiliar to students, and they may resist taking control of their learning and being pushed into an uncomfortable place where they must be active participants in the construction of knowledge and not merely passive recipients. Literature circles are not always democratic. As with any group, there will be disruptions: A student may emerge as a leader and take over the conversations. Students may be embarrassed about their responses or be too shy to speak up. There will be students who do not complete the assignment or students who are absent. Talk in the group may stray from the text and disintegrate in conversations about the party on Friday night. Of course, there simply may be no time in a class to indulge in this modality on a regular basis.

With all that said, Harvey Daniels's literature circles methodology is a classroom practice that will equip students with the tools for access to a text, promote independent practice when approaching a text, foster conversation about a text, and support the view that reading is a recursive process similar to the writing process.

Students need access on many levels. Literature circles and role sheets offer access.

Appendix A: Role Sheets

Role	Description
<i>Discussion Director</i>	questions as we read
<i>Literary Luminary</i>	identifies challenges and/or memorable passages, passages we read, analyze, or share with someone.
<i>Content Connector</i>	accesses prior knowledge as we make associations and connect a text with our experiences, our communities and other texts.
<i>Character Coordinator</i>	considers a character through dialogue, behavior, and what others say.
<i>Word Wizard</i>	identifies and defines new words or phrases.
<i>Illustrator</i>	creates a mental representation of texts through diagrams, maps, organizing ideas, theories, arguments and/or structure of the text.
<i>Message Maker</i>	identifies the overarching message of a text.
<i>Summarizer</i>	recaps the reading.
<i>Group Sheet</i>	A sheet created for the collective findings of each group.
<i>Reflection Sheet</i>	A sheet created to capture the students' reflections about their reading processes and experiences.

**It is important to note that the traditional roles sheets can be tailored as needed.

Appendix B: Reflection Sheet

- *Describe your experience reading the assigned chapters with a specific task to complete.*
- *How did performing your assigned task change the way you read the book?*
- *How did reading this way help/ not help your reading?*
- *Explain why this task was/ was not difficult.*
- *Describe your experience discussing your responses with your group.*
- *How did your classmates respond?*
- *Describe your experience listening to other members discuss their responses.*

References

- ACT National Curriculum Survey 2009.
<http://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/NationalCurriculumSurvey2009.pdf>
- ACT National Curriculum Survey 2016
http://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/NCS_Report_Web.pdf
- Alvermann, Donna E. and David A. Hayes. "Classroom Discussion of Content Area Reading Assignments: An Intervention Study." *Reading Research Quarterly*, vol. 24, no. 3, 1989, pp. 305–35. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, doi:10.2307/747772.
- Anson, Chris M. "Writing to Read, Revisited." *What Is College Reading?* Horning, Alice S., et al. editors. WAC Clearinghouse: University Press of Colorado, 2017, pp. 21-39.
<https://wac.colostate.edu/docs/books/collegereading/anson.pdf>
- Bruce, Heather E. "Hoop Dancing: Literature Circles and Native American Storytelling." *The English Journal*, vol. 93, no. 1, Sept. 2003, p. 54. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, doi:10.2307/3650571.
- Carillo, Ellen C. *Securing a Place for Reading in Composition: The Importance of Teaching for Transfer*. Utah State University Press, 2015.
- Costa, Arthur L., and Bena Kallick, editors. *Learning and Leading with Habits of Mind: 16 Essential Characteristics for Success*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2008.
- Council of Writing Program Administrators et al. "Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing." Jan. 2011, <http://wpacouncil.org/files/framework-for-success-postsecondary-writing.pdf>.
- Daniels, Harvey. *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom*. Pembroke Publishers, 1994.
- Del Principe, Annie and Rachel Ihara. "A Long Look at Reading in the Community College: A Longitudinal Analysis of Student Reading Experiences." *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, vol. 45, no. 2, Dec. 2017, pp. 183-206.
- Dewey, John. *Experience and Education*. 1. Ed, Simon & Schuster, 1997.
- Durkin, Dolores. "What Classroom Observations Reveal About Reading Comprehension Instruction." *Reading Research Quarterly*, vol. 14, no. 4, 1978, pp. 481–533. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, doi:10.1598/RRQ.14.4.2.

- Fredricks, Lori. "The Benefits and Challenges of Culturally Responsive EFL Critical Literature Circles." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, vol. 55, no. 6, Mar. 2012, pp. 494–504.
- Gray, William S. "Reading Difficulties in College." *The Journal of Higher Education*, vol. 7, no. 7, Oct. 1936, p. 356. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, doi:10.2307/1974217.
- Haas, Christina and Linda Flower. "Rhetorical Reading Strategies and the Construction of Meaning." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 39, no. 2, May 1988, p. 167. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, doi:10.2307/358026.
- Heineke, Amy J. "Dialoging About English Learners: Preparing Teachers Through Culturally Relevant Literature Circles." *Action in Teacher Education*, vol. 36, no. 2, Mar. 2014, pp. 117–40. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, doi:10.1080/01626620.2014.898600.
- Horning, Alice S., et al. editors. *What Is College Reading?* WAC Clearinghouse: University Press of Colorado, 2017.
- Howard, Rebecca Moore, et al. "Writing from Sources, Writing from Sentences." *Writing & Pedagogy*, vol. 2, no. 2, Dec. 2010, pp. 177–92. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, doi:10.1558/wap.v2i2.177.
- Jolliffe, David A., and Allison Harl. "Studying the 'Reading Transition' from High School to College: What Are Our Students Reading and Why?" *College English*, vol. 70, no. 6, 2008, pp. 599–617. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/25472296.
- Ketch, Ann. "Conversation: The Comprehension Connection." *The Reading Teacher*, vol. 59, no. 1, 2005, pp. 8–13. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/20204313.
- Langer, Judith. "Discussion as Exploration: Literature and the Horizon of Possibilities." Report Series 6.3. ERIC, 30 Nov. 1990, <http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED350604>
- Medina, Patsy. "The Intricacies of Initiate-Response-Evaluate in Adult Literacy Education," Adult Education Research Conference, July 2001, <http://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2001/papers/49>
- Mills, Heidi and Louise Jennings. "Talking About Talk: Reclaiming the Value and Power of Literature Circles." *The Reading Teacher*, vol. 64, no. 8, May 2011, pp. 590–98. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, doi:10.1598/RT.64.8.4.
- Noll, Elizabeth. "Social Issues and Literature Circles with Adolescents." *Journal of Reading*, vol. 38, no. 2, 1994, pp. 88–93. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/40032274. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, doi:10.2307/4128941.

Levy

- Odom, Mary Lou. "Multiliteracies and Meaning-Making: Writing Across the Curriculum." *What Is College Reading?* Horning, Alice S., et al. editors. WAC Clearinghouse: University Press of Colorado, 2017, pp.255-270.
<https://wac.colostate.edu/docs/books/collegereading/odom.pdf>
- Peterson, Ralph and Maryann Eeds. *Grand Conversations: Literature Groups in Action*. New York: Scholastic, 1990.
- Porter-O'Donnell, Carol. "Beyond the Yellow Highlighter: Teaching Annotation Skills to Improve Reading Comprehension." *The English Journal*, vol. 93, no. 5, May
- Rosenblatt, Louise M. *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*. Paperback ed, Southern Illinois University Press, 1994.
- Skeans, Sharon Sicinski. "Reading... with Pen in Hand!" *The English Journal*, vol. 89, no. 4, Mar. 2000, p. 69. DOI.org (Crossref), doi:10.2307/821987.
- Smith, Frederick R., and Karen M. Feathers. "The Role of Reading in Content Classrooms: Assumption vs. Reality." *Journal of Reading*, vol.27, no. 3, 1983, pp. 262-267. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/40029325.
- Swigart, William. "Classroom Talk, Knowledge Development, and Writing." *Research in the Teaching of English*, vol. 25, no. 4, 1991, pp. 469–496. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/40171205.
- Thein, Amanda Heartling, Megan Guise and DeAnn Long Sloan. "Problematizing Literature Circles as Forums for Discussion of Multicultural and Political Texts." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, vol. 55, no.1, Sept. 2011, pp. 15-24.
- Tierney, Robert J. and P. David Pearson. "Toward a Composing Model of Reading. Reading" Education Report No. 43. ERIC, 31 July 1983, eric.ed.gov/?id=ED233329.
- Vaughn, Margaret, et al. "Revisiting Literature Circles as Open Spaces for Critical Discussions." *Journal of Reading Education*, vol. 40, no.2, Winter 2015, pp. 27-32.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/278666913_Revisiting_literature_circles_as_open_spaces_for_critical_discussions
- Wood, Nancy. "College Reading Instruction as Reflected by Current Reading Textbooks." pp29-43. Stahl, Norman A., and Hunter R. Boylan. *Teaching Developmental Reading: Historical, Theoretical and Practical Background Readings*. Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003.

Wyatt, Monica. "The Past, Present, and Future Need for College Reading Courses in the U.S" pp12-28. Stahl, Norman A., and Hunter R. Boylan. *Teaching Developmental Reading: Historical, Theoretical and Practical Background Readings*. Bedford/St.

About the Author

Ronna J. Levy is an Associate Professor of English and Co-Director of the Developmental English program at Kingsborough Community College City University of New York (CUNY). She has been a member on the CUNY Reading Panel; the CUNY Advisory Committee for Developmental English and is the co-chair of the CUNY Writing Discipline Council. She served on Chowan University's On-Site Reaffirmation Committee as their lead Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) Evaluator in preparation for reaccreditation from Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges. Chowan University's QEP is based on her research with Literature Circles.

Open Words: Access and English Studies is an open-access, peer-review scholarly journal, published on the WAC Clearinghouse and supported by Colorado State University. Articles are published under a Creative Commons BY-NC-ND license (Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs).

ISSN: 2690-3911 (Print) 2690-392X (Online).