

7 Students Becoming Real Readers: Literature Circles in High School English Classes

Sandra Okura DaLie
Grant High School, Los Angeles

The most important revelation I have had about what we do as teachers is the realization that learning must be student centered (Brooks & Brooks, 1993). Students, not the teacher, must be at the heart of the learning process, and they must be active participants in their own learning process, not passive recipients. No other idea has influenced me and transformed the way I teach more than this one. The second most influential understanding I have developed is that learning is not neat and tidy, something to be regimented by straight rows, silence, and wrong or right answers. If students are indeed to be active participants in their own learning process, then they must have the opportunity and the freedom to talk, challenge, experiment, and collaborate. Genuine learning is, therefore, a bit messy, unquestionably noisy, often surprising, and always rewarding to observe.

Extending these insights to reading in the high school recently led me to embrace with enthusiasm literature circles. Literature circles provide an opportunity for me to teach the reading of literary text in a way that is consistent with what I understand about learning and reading. For too long we veteran teachers have clung to the archaic notions that we hold all the correct answers, that we are founts of all interpretive wisdom and literary understanding, and that it is our mission to impart all that we know and love of literature to the uninformed and unenlightened. In clinging to these misbeliefs, we have not allowed our students to genuinely make meaning in their reading, nor to discover for themselves the simple joy of reading a good book and talking

about it with others. Harvey Daniels recognized that we teachers have “traditionally allowed kids little choice or ownership of their reading, instead marching them through an endless lockstep series of teacher-selected and teacher-controlled readings. . . . The result: kids don’t get enough practice with reading to get good at it—or like it” (1994, p. 11). Within the construct of literature circles, however, students select a book they want to read, frame and negotiate meaning, and then talk about it, just like “real” readers.

Literature circles were first introduced by Daniels to colleagues in the Chicago area. The circles are becoming enormously popular among teachers across the country, probably because they are so versatile and can be modified to accommodate a wide range of ages, circumstances, and needs. Still, some basic tenets of literature circles should be emphasized:

- Students choose their own reading materials and form groups based on book choice, with different groups reading different books.
- Groups meet regularly to discuss their reading.
- Students create notes, questions, or drawings to guide their discussion.
- Group discussions should be open and natural, an activity in which personal connections, digressions, fun, imagination, curiosity, and even disagreements are welcome.
- Initially, while learning to interact in literature circles, students assume designated roles with specified tasks.
- The teacher serves as a facilitator only, not as a participant.
- Evaluation is by teacher observation and student self-evaluation.
- When students are finished reading and discussing a book, they form new groups around new reading choices. (Daniels, 1994, p. 18; LiteratureCircles.com, 2000).

How Literature Circles Work

I teach a diverse range of students in a large urban public high school; my classes include everything from Advanced Placement English literature to sheltered first-year classes. I use literature circles with all my students and encounter widely varying reactions. The students who seem to enjoy literature circles the most are the English-language learners, the recent immigrants who have completed the English Language Development (or ESL) course of study and are transitioning to regular English classes. These students are discovering, perhaps for the

first time, that their newly acquired reading abilities can be a source of accomplishment and satisfaction. My more able readers (e.g., those identified as honors and gifted kids) need a little help in becoming comfortable with new classroom dynamics because literature circles are a new experience for most. Many of them have been so driven by external incentives such as tests and grades that they are not accustomed to reading for enjoyment or creating their own meaning, at least not in a school setting. And sadly, some of them are more familiar with competition than collaboration and must adapt to cooperative, productive group settings. Among these students, it is gratifying to see real readers emerge from hiding to promote a particular understanding of a character or profess a love and passion for books that heretofore might have seemed “uncool.”

I use literature circles for a variety of purposes, in a number of different ways. Admittedly, I have at times used variations of the format to salvage poor time management on my part, as, for example, near the end of the school year when students need to complete several required core readings. I have also used literature circles with a single text for students with limited English proficiency when I felt that my more teacher-centered instruction wasn't getting through to them. But literature circles work best simply as a way to lure my students to read for pleasure, when the main objective is to allow students to read freely, joyfully, and independently.

This is how the process works: For a class size of thirty, I obtain about five copies of six different books. I try to choose books of high interest but varying reading levels to accommodate the range of reading abilities among my students. I preview each book with the entire class. Together, we talk about the title of the book. What do you think it means? We look at the illustrations on the cover. What do you predict will happen in this book? We think about the author. Have you read anything else by this person? Did you like it? After this brief discussion, students get to browse,

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just like real readers do when they go to a bookstore or library. I allow them time to get up and go to a book, pick it up, weigh it in their hands (an important consideration to a high school student seems to be how heavy a book is), check out the size of the print (another important consideration), and, most important, read the back cover. Students must

then write down their first and second choices. I collect these papers and announce the book selections the following day. Ideally, I would let every student have his or her first choice, but I have found the logistics a little easier to manage—e.g., classroom space, number of books—if I even out the groups and keep them to around five people to a book. A student who is frequently absent from class might become the sixth member of a group.

The next day I announce the book assignments and distribute the role description sheets and the timeline. Students form groups according to the books they have been assigned. The first thing the groups must do is “chunk out” their book. Here is math and English interdisciplinary instruction in action. The students determine the number of pages in their book and divide it by the number of literature circle meetings we have scheduled (usually six or eight) to determine the average number of pages they must finish as their outside reading. Students learn to “smooth out” the chunks by flipping pages forward or backward a page or two to find a logical break in the text as a stopping point. This feature of literature circles is in itself a valuable exercise for teenagers learning about responsible time management. Each group then completes a timeline, apprising me of the reading schedule. The process is most likely to break down when students come to class on literature circle days and say they “forgot” what the reading assignment was. Having a copy of the schedule in their notebook seems to have little impact on some students in my classes. Instead, I have found that students prefer to use sticky notes to mark off the chunks of their text rather than write the assignments down in their notebooks. They affix the sticky notes upside down, with about a quarter of an inch protruding from the top of the book. They write the discussion dates on the portions of the notes that protrude.

Next, the students decide on the roles they are to assume during literature circle discussions. There is some debate among my colleagues about the use of assigned roles in literature circles. Ideally, students should engage in book talk freely and without artificial constraints or demands. Successful conversation in groups for my classes, however, requires careful consideration, without which a barrage of questions and complaints would begin: “Chris is just sitting there and not doing any of the work.” “Lee is absent again. Will this hurt our group grade?” Assigned literature circle roles provide students with boundaries and clear expectations, and I find that they respond well to this kind of structure. Groups become more productive and the quality of conversation improves. Equally important, these roles have supported all of my students in acquiring the behaviors, skills, and vocabulary of readers.

One way to facilitate the assignment of roles is to distribute a list of the roles with their titles and responsibilities. Daniels created a list of roles that has stood the tests of time and practice (1994, pp. 24–25). I have modified role descriptions slightly for my high school students by writing them as if they were jobs for which they might apply. For each role, I provide a job description, qualifications needed, and the specific responsibilities the job will entail. Here is a sample:

Discussion Director

| | |
|------------------|--|
| Job Description | Your job is to develop a list of questions that your group will want to discuss about the reading. Through your questions, you must help people recognize important ideas in the book. You must control the conversation so that everyone has a fair chance to express his or her opinion. |
| Qualifications | Must have leadership abilities. Also must have a good understanding of the book in order to ask questions that will evoke thoughtful discussion. Must have good attendance. |
| Responsibilities | You must provide at least five questions at each meeting of your literature circle. You must make sure that everyone in your group has an opportunity to speak. |

In describing the specific qualifications needed for each role, I intentionally include some roles for which good attendance is not mandatory. Students with poor attendance are a reality at my school and a challenge to group work. I have found that providing a specific role for this type of student, something like Vocabulary Enricher, is a feasible and humane response to a difficult situation. The diverse literature circle roles allow students to exercise their unique strengths, learning modalities, and intelligences. Students are amazingly adept at choosing appropriate roles for themselves.

I have observed literature circles in action in many different classrooms, and while every teacher has modified the format slightly to suit his or her needs, the roles remain fairly consistent. What varies is the teacher's decision about the length of time a student assumes a role. Some teachers like to have their students rotate roles with every meeting of the literature circle so that ultimately every student has the opportunity to function in every role. My preference is to allow students to stay in their roles through the completion of a book. I find that they get into a groove and become increasingly proficient at their jobs.

One activity teachers can use to introduce literature circles in their classes is whole-class practice with a short story, allowing students to model every role before breaking out into groups. Recently, as an introduction to literature circles I used *Of Mice and Men* with all groups and required every student to create a portfolio of examples of his or her work for each literature circle role. The fine quality of their responses assured me that these students were willing to assume these roles independent of further instruction.

Literature Circle Roles and Responsibilities

The **Discussion Director** creates open-ended questions and facilitates group discussion. Directors must understand that their role is not to “give the right answers” but to promote deep understanding and lively conversation. It is also important to help potential Discussion Directors recognize the kinds of questions they should ask and those they should avoid. After a little practice and modeling, students rise to the challenge and provide fresh insights that often surpass my expectations. For instance, a Discussion Director in charge of a conversation about *Of Mice and Men* asked her group, “Who do you think needed the other person more, George or Lennie?”

Other sample questions:

- What was going through your mind when you read this?
- What are the one or two most important ideas or developments?
- What parts are still unclear to you? Or what didn't you understand about a character or situation?
- Can you predict some things we might discuss the next time we meet?

The **Illustrator** is a much-coveted role among artistic students. This is a perfect role for the student who rarely completes a written assignment but will draw on a piece of scratch paper all day long. The Illustrator's job is to represent key scenes from the reading. An alternative to drawing scenes might be to create a collage of magazine pictures or to download relevant, appropriate pictures from the Internet. Initially I perceived the role of Illustrator as being somewhat superfluous, until I observed the dialogue that a single picture could generate among students. The Illustrator in one group for *Of Mice and Men* brought in her original drawing of a giant rabbit scolding Lennie just before the climactic scene at the end. I overheard one of her groupmates state, “I didn't get that part of the book before. Now I do.”

The **Literary Luminary** brings attention to key lines, quotes, and details from the text. The selections can focus on that which is interesting,

powerful, funny, important, puzzling, or worth hearing. As for the personal qualifications of a good Literary Luminary, I tell students that these individuals must be able to read closely and recognize humor, irony, and important ideas. To be truthful, I don't know how to "teach" this role to the students; on the other hand, I have found little need to do much more than model it a few times. Literary Luminaries consistently have strong instincts about what is significant and what is not. In the same *Of Mice and Men* group, I heard the Literary Luminary directing her peers to the following quote in which George tells Lennie, "With us it ain't like that. We got a future. We got somebody to talk to that gives a damn about us. We don't have to sit in no bar room blowing our jack just because we got no place else to go. If them other guys gets in jail, they can rot for all anybody gives a damn. But not us" (Steinbeck, 1993, pp. 13–14).

The **Vocabulary Enricher** looks up definitions for important, unfamiliar words. Though not the most intellectually stimulating role, it is still important, especially for students still gaining competence in English or for students who want to participate but lack the self-confidence to fulfill some of the other roles. Sometimes a group will save this role for a member with inconsistent attendance. A sample entry of a Vocabulary Enricher might look like this:

Word: disarming

Definition: making it difficult for a person to feel anger or suspicion

Sample Sentence: "Crooks scowled, but Lennie's disarming smile defeated him." (Steinbeck, 1993, p. 69)

Vocabulary Enrichers might then ask others in the group to create their own sentences with the word, or they might consider other forms of the word and how they might be used in sentences.

The **Connector** is a favorite second choice for those students who enjoy being the Discussion Director. The Connector sees relationships between the reading and the real world: students' personal lives, people their age, events at school or in their community or the news. Another possible source of connections can be within the selection itself or between the current reading and literature they have read previously. One Connector related three minor characters from *Of Mice and Men*—Candy, Crooks, and Curley's wife—by pointing out their common experience of being excluded from the group. He asked his classmates to describe times when they too have felt left out and alone.

Students who have artistic ability also enjoy being the **Travel Tracker**. This job is to illustrate scenes and settings from the assigned reading. One Travel Tracker from our discussion of *Of Mice and Men* represented the climactic chapter by drawing two scenes, Lennie in the

barn and the ranch hands playing horseshoes outside. Students identified the contrast between the two simple drawings and how they effectively illustrated the tragedy of Lennie's actions.

Summarizing is a difficult reading skill that must at some point be taught. The student who elects to be the **Summarizer** for the group is usually a strong reader and good critical thinker. Good Summarizers are real assets to their literature circle groups because they help their peers see the overall picture. A proficient Summarizer is one who can, for example, extract important details from the first chapter of *Of Mice and Men*, such as Lennie's simplistic nature, George's frustration at being Lennie's caretaker, their troubled past, and their mutual devotion. An especially gifted Summarizer might pick up on Steinbeck's foreshadowing, as well as the undercurrent of impending tragedy.

The **Investigator** has the fascinating assignment of digging up background information on any topic related to the reading. I like to recommend this role to a student who has trouble staying on topic. It is also a good role for a student who enjoys finding information on the Internet. Supplemental information might shed light on geography, history, time period, music, author, objects, culture, art, or artifacts. The Investigator for the *Of Mice and Men* group brought in pictures of an early California ranch and a map of California. His group members were eager to find where Salinas was located and see how far it was from where they lived.

It is useful to provide a list of these eight roles to groups consisting of four or five members. Having a choice allows students to find roles that are best suited to them. The only stipulation I make is that every group must have a Discussion Director. All the other roles are optional.

Assessing Literature Circles

We walk a fine line when it comes to assessing and evaluating the outcomes of literature circles. If the true intent of this activity is to promote the making of meaning and a love of reading, then grades and assessment seem paradoxical. Still, we are under certain professional obligations in this matter, and for most of us, assigning grades is simply a necessity.

One grade is based on a rubric that assesses each student's participation in his or her group and is based on self-, peer, and teacher evaluation. Every member of the group completes an evaluation for all group members, as does the teacher by circulating from group to group. After a discussion of the importance of this task, I have found students' evaluations to be largely honest and accurate. Student and teacher scores for each student are averaged to determine one grade. An example of a student's evaluation appears in Figure 7.1.

| | |
|--|--|
| Name <u> Ruben </u> | Date <u> June 6 </u> |
| Title of Book <u> Joy Luck Club </u> | |
| <i>Please evaluate how well each member of your group functioned during your discussion today.</i> | |
| Student's Name: <u> Linda </u> | Role: <u> Discussion Director </u> |
| Behavior During Lit Circles | Often Sometimes Never |
| Stayed on task during group activities | <u> X </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> |
| Cooperated with other group members | <u> X </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> |
| Treated all members with respect | <u> X </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> |
| Made significant contribution to the group | <u> X </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> |
| Completed assigned work | <u> X </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> |
| Comments: <u> She's doing a good job. She's always prepared, and she works hard to try to get everybody to participate in discussion. </u> | |
| I think this student deserves a/an <u> A </u> for today. | |
| | |
| Student's Name: <u> Dave </u> | Role: <u> Vocabulary Enricher </u> |
| Behavior During Lit Circles | Often Sometimes Never |
| Stayed on task during group activities | <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> X </u> |
| Cooperated with other group members | <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> X </u> |
| Treated all members with respect | <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> X </u> |
| Made significant contribution to the group | <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> X </u> |
| Completed assigned work | <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> X </u> |
| Comments: <u> He was absent again today. </u> | |
| I think this student deserves a/an <u> </u> for today. | |
| | |
| Student's Name: <u> Carlos </u> | Role: <u> Illustrator </u> |
| Behavior During Lit Circles | Often Sometimes Never |
| Stayed on task during group activities | <u> </u> <u> X </u> <u> </u> |
| Cooperated with other group members | <u> </u> <u> X </u> <u> </u> |
| Treated all members with respect | <u> X </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> |
| Made significant contribution to the group | <u> </u> <u> X </u> <u> </u> |
| Completed assigned work | <u> X </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> |
| Comments: <u> He drew good pictures and we talked about them, but he didn't do much the rest of the time in the group. </u> | |
| I think this student deserves a/an <u> B- </u> for today. | |
| <i>continued on next page</i> | |

Figure 7.1. Literature Circles: Peer Evaluation

Figure 7.1 continued

| | | | |
|---|--------------|---------------------------|--------------|
| Student's Name: <u>Sam</u> | | Role: <u>Investigator</u> | |
| Behavior During Lit Circles | Often | Sometimes | Never |
| Stayed on task during group activities | ___ | <u>X</u> | ___ |
| Cooperated with other group members | ___ | ___ | <u>X</u> |
| Treated all members with respect | ___ | <u>X</u> | ___ |
| Made significant contribution to the group | ___ | ___ | <u>X</u> |
| Completed assigned work | ___ | ___ | <u>X</u> |
| Comments: <u>He didn't bring anything new today, and he didn't really participate in the discussion. I'm not sure he did the reading.</u> | | | |
| I think this student deserves a/an <u>C-/D</u> for today. | | | |
| | | | |
| Student's Name: <u>Me (Ruben)</u> | | Role: <u>Connector</u> | |
| Behavior During Lit Circles | Often | Sometimes | Never |
| Stayed on task during group activities | <u>X</u> | ___ | ___ |
| Cooperated with other group members | <u>X</u> | ___ | ___ |
| Treated all members with respect | ___ | <u>X</u> | ___ |
| Made significant contribution to the group | ___ | <u>X</u> | ___ |
| Completed assigned work | <u>X</u> | ___ | ___ |
| Comments: <u>I made some good connections to real life and I participated well in discussion. I was probably too critical of Sam because he didn't do much today.</u> | | | |
| I think this student deserves a/an <u>A-</u> for today. | | | |
| | | | |
| Student's Name: _____ | | Role: _____ | |
| Behavior During Lit Circles | Often | Sometimes | Never |
| Stayed on task during group activities | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| Cooperated with other group members | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| Treated all members with respect | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| Made significant contribution to the group | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| Completed assigned work | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| Comments: _____ | | | |
| I think this student deserves a/an _____ for today. | | | |

| | | |
|--|---------|---------|
| <p>Objective: The purpose of this activity is for your literature circle group to demonstrate your understanding of the book you read. Your finished products will be presented to the class and then placed on display in our school library to encourage other students' interest in reading.</p> | | |
| <p>Activity: On a piece of 8 1/2 by 11-inch paper, you will create a publicity brochure for the book you read. Each member of your group will be responsible for providing the text or the graphics for one panel of the brochure.</p> | | |
| <p>Instructions:</p> <p>Fold the sheet of paper lengthwise into three equal parts. The two ends of the paper will fold toward the front (Side A).</p> <p>Side A (front of paper)</p> | | |
| | | |
| Panel 1 | Panel 2 | Panel 3 |
| <i>continued on next page</i> | | |

Figure 7.2. Literature Circles Culminating Activity Student Handout: The Publicity Brochure

A second, more substantial grade is usually based on a culminating project or activity. A project I often assign is a compilation of all the individual assignments into one group portfolio that showcases their collected work: the Discussion Director's questions and the group's responses; the Illustrator's drawings; the Vocabulary Enricher's word lists; and so on. These portfolios not only reflect what has occurred in the literature circles, but they also become classroom resources for students making reading selections for future literature circles.

Another assessment activity that has been effective as a culminating activity is to have each group make a three-panel, twofold pub-

Figure 7.2 continued

| | | |
|---|---------|---------|
| Side B (back of paper) | | |
| | | |
| Panel 4 | Panel 5 | Panel 6 |
| <p>Suggested Uses for the Panels:</p> <p>SIDE A (front of paper)</p> <p>Panel 1 When your brochure is finished, this panel will be the inside cover. The Connector should provide three or four of his or her best insights in this section.</p> <p>Panel 2 The Travel Tracker can either reproduce visuals or “cut and paste” them onto this middle panel.</p> <p>Panel 3 On this panel, the Literary Luminary can showcase four or five significant quotes from the text.</p> <p>SIDE B (back of paper)</p> <p>Panel 4 When your brochure is completed and folded correctly, this will be the second panel your reader will see. The Summarizer should provide a clear, concise overview of the plot of the book.</p> <p>Panel 5 Here on the back of your brochure, the Investigator can provide some fascinating and enriching background information for the novel.</p> <p>Panel 6 This panel will be the cover of your brochure. It must contain the title of the book you read, the author, and a visual provided by your Illustrator. In addition, the names of all the members of your group should appear on this panel so that you can receive the recognition you deserve!</p> | | |

licity flier for their book. The information and visuals they use to create the brochure represent the work of all members of the group, as explained in Figure 7.2. Of course, numerous other modifications are possible for the panels.

Making Literature Circles Work

The true intent of literature circles is to allow students to practice and develop the skills and strategies of good readers. Experience has borne out the necessity to directly teach some of these skills. Summarizing, for example, is a skill that requires guidance from me, as does paraphrasing and citing supporting evidence and examples. Similarly, high school students are not comfortable with discord, and multiple, differing viewpoints often result in flaring tempers and rising voices. I have had to teach my students the concept of civilly agreeing to disagree at times. We even practice prefacing statements with phrases such as, “I respect your opinion” or “I can see why you feel that way.” All of these skills are perfect topics for ten-minute minilessons that I offer at the start of a class. It is important to remember that even as we empower our students to function with increasing independence, we must not forfeit our responsibility to provide the supports needed for success.

Availability of books for group reading is a problem at many schools. Where I teach, we are currently in the process of allocating some of our budget to the creation of literature circle “reading kits.” With so many of us using the literature circle format with our students, we have come up with the idea of creating bins of books—seven titles to a bin, six copies per title—ranging in reading level from easy to difficult. These bins will rotate from classroom to classroom to allow students a constantly changing array of books from which to choose. Here are some of the titles we are considering:

For Less Able Readers

- *A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich* (Alice Childress). A thirteen-year-old boy is well on his way to becoming a heroin addict.
 - *Hoops* (Walter Dean Myers). Seventeen-year-old Lonnie Jackson hopes that basketball will be his ticket out of Harlem. His coach knows the pressures he will have to face.
 - *Number the Stars* (Lois Lowry). This is an inspiring story of a young Danish girl's bravery when Nazis threaten her best friend's safety.
 - *Sister of the Bride* (Beverly Cleary). A sixteen-year-old helps her older sister prepare for a wedding.
 - *The Slave Dancer* (Paula Fox). Thirteen-year-old Jesse is thrown aboard a slave ship.
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- *Taking Sides* (Gary Soto). Lincoln Mendoza moves to a new home, but his friendships and loyalties remain with his friends in his old neighborhood.
- *Then Again, Maybe I Won't* (Judy Blume). Tony's family experiences newly acquired wealth, but Tony has nothing but problems.

For "In the Middle" Readers

- *The Contender* (Robert Lipsyte). Alfred struggles to become a fighter and live respectably in a rundown ghetto.
- *Dragonwings* (Laurence Yep). This story of a Chinese immigrant and his son's attempt to build a flying machine provides a unique perspective of the Chinese American community in the early twentieth century.
- *Gentlehands* (M. E. Kerr). A teenage boy falls in love with an upper-class girl and gets to know his estranged grandfather in a summer that climaxes in a shattering search for Nazi war criminals.
- *Homecoming* (Cynthia Voigt). Four abandoned children, ages six to thirteen, demonstrate courage, resourcefulness, and sheer will to stay together and find a home.
- *It Happened to Nancy* (Anonymous teenager and Beatrice Sparks). A heartbreaking diary recounts a teenager's ordeal after she is date raped at the age of fourteen, contracts AIDS, and dies at sixteen.
- *Nothing but the Truth* (Avi). Ninth grader Philip Malloy decides to annoy his homeroom teacher by humming to "The Star Spangled Banner" and soon finds himself at the center of a national controversy.
- *Stranger with My Face* (Lois Duncan). A seventeen-year-old senses she is being spied on and perhaps impersonated, but then she discovers what is actually occurring.

For Able Readers

- *Buried Onions* (Gary Soto). Nineteen-year-old Eddie drops out of college and struggles to find a place for himself as a Mexican American in Fresno, California.
 - *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (Douglas Adams). Seconds before the Earth is demolished to make way for a galactic freeway, Arthur Dent is plucked off the planet by his friend Ford Prefect, a researcher for the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.
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- *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (Julia Alvarez). Four Latinas are uprooted from their pampered life of privilege on an island and thrown into the chaos of life in the big city.
- *Necessary Roughness* (Marie G. Lee). A Korean American teen narrates the story of his family's move from Los Angeles to Minnesota, the racism there, playing high school football, and grieving over the death of his sister.
- *The Road from Home* (David Kherdian). Verna Dumejian, born to a prosperous Armenian family in Turkey, experiences the end to her happy childhood in 1915 when the Turkish government deports her family.
- *Shizuko's Daughter* (Kyoko Mori). After her mother's suicide, Yuki, living with her distant father and his resentful new wife, must rely on her own inner strength to cope with the tragedy.
- *Someone Is Hiding on Alcatraz Island* (Eve Bunting). Danny has tangled with the toughest gang in school and heads to Alcatraz Island to escape the gang's revenge.

Why Literature Circles Work

Literature circles have become a reliable, successful instructional approach in my classes and in many of my colleagues' classes. I believe that it is the elements of authenticity, empowerment, and collaboration that make them so effective.

As the literacy coordinator for my school of 3,700 students from diverse backgrounds, I have been trying to identify what draws a person to reading—that is, what makes a person become a reader for life. Certainly, our traditional approach to the teaching of literature does not guarantee this conversion from student to lifelong reader. Writing book reports and taking multiple-choice tests at the end of a good novel are not part of an adult's reading experience. In contrast, the behaviors and practices that literature circles encourage are much more authentic. Students are invited to read, think, imagine, question, laugh, and talk. Applebee (1992) exhorts us to "develop programs that emphasize students' ability to develop and defend their interpretations of literary selections, rather than ones that focus only on knowledge about texts, authors, and terminology" (p. 12). When working in literature circles, students respond positively to that which they perceive as genuine and meaningful.

Adolescents are at a developmental stage that directly conflicts with the structure of the traditional classroom. While the traditional

teacher is demanding compliance with seemingly arbitrary expectations, teenagers are seeking to forge their independence and make their own choices. It is no wonder that so much energy—from teacher and students alike—can be expended in disciplinary skirmishes. High school students in particular benefit from opportunities to have a voice in what they learn, to be given some decision-making power in the classroom. Literature circles provide these opportunities by allowing students to select their books and their roles. To some, this might not seem a tremendous amount of choice, but it is one step closer to making the classroom better suited to the psychosocial needs of adolescents. Moreover, the literature circle format validates the opinions and perspectives of our students, something that does not happen enough in the high school classroom. According to Langer (1992), “Schooling rarely asks students to share their own understandings of a text, nor does it help students learn to build richer ones through the exploration of possibilities” (p. 38). It has been my experience that the lively discourse and exchange of diverse perspectives in literature circles have done more to promote critical reading in my students than most of the other learning situations I have facilitated.

The virtues of cooperative learning have been extolled for years, but too often in practice we set up students for failure. We throw them into groups and give them complex tasks that require them to know how to speak, listen, negotiate, delegate, initiate, and compromise. And we have assumed that they have the skills to do all of these things successfully! Then, when small-group activities are not successful, teachers abandon group work altogether. As a result, students rarely experience the true power and potential of collaboration. Literature circles avoid those fatal assumptions. They provide a safe and supportive structure within which our students can interact. They define the roles that our students are asked to assume and allow them the time to develop important interpersonal communication skills. Best of all, they inevitably provide our students with proof that they will benefit from the respectful sharing and receiving of each person’s unique talents and insights.

It has been a great source of joy to see my students grow in their reading abilities as a result of their experiences in literature circles. When we put students in the center of their own learning process, provide them with support and encouragement, and trust in their ability to rise to our expectations, we can step back and watch true learning in action.

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