

Benefits of Online Literature Circles in the College Arena

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ABSTRACT

Due to the tremendous focus on technology inclusion in today's society, it is common for faculty to discover new ways to implement technology within class activities. One big challenge education professors face in the collegiate classroom is the reduction of face-to-face time. So, the question becomes how to provide content coverage all the while ensuring candidates are receiving quality instruction methodology. This paper describes how online literature circles have empowered students to become effective future teachers. Included are the benefits that go beyond comprehension and content knowledge. By implementing online literature circles in the classroom, it increases critical thinking, collaboration, personal connections, differentiation, exposure to different genres, accountability, and feedback.

INTRODUCTION

Content coverage and time management were two of the biggest challenges I faced upon transitioning from the K-12 into the collegiate classroom. My K-12 classroom provided a consistent five-day week with at least 100 minutes a day to introduce and support learning goals and objectives. The collegiate classroom reduces this face-to-face time greatly. So, the question becomes how do I provide content coverage all the while ensuring students are getting everything they need to be effective teachers. As I searched for an answer, I recall the words my Chair told me the day I was hired, "These students really are not much different than your elementary students." I was startled by her comment. I thought to myself how can these students be like my elementary students?

After a couple of weeks, the words she stated resounded with me. I realized that the teaching strategies I used with my elementary students could easily be adapted for my college level students. This when I had an ah-ha moment...*literature circles!* I would use my methods book to lecture from and use literature circle books as supplemental resources. That resolved the content issue but time management remained. Then it really hit me...online literature circles. Honestly, the first semester was a trial and error. The learning curve I experienced in the utilization of literature circles was just as long as my students. Decisions such as how much should I assign to read in one week? When should original posts be due? When should responses be due? What roles would be the most effective in the college setting? A mainstay throughout this process was the amount of content to cover and nearly not enough time. But I had to try something.

Wow! What words cannot describe how happy I am that I took the time and effort to implement online literature circles. The outcomes outpaced the projections. Granted these outcomes were a result of trial and errors, rubric edits, upset students, and a tremendous amount of reading. The resulting outcomes have been well worth the effort. One of the most significant benefits of using literature circles was it increased rigor and higher-order thinking. First, I would like to list and describe the roles my students are assigned for online literature circles. Note the role change compared to in-class literature circle roles. Students are assigned as: Discussion Directors, Summarizers, Word Wizards, Connectors, or Literary

Luminary. At the beginning of the semester role sheets provide assignments for the whole semester. The learning management system (LMS) (e.g. Blackboard) permits the group random assignments. I use five as the maximum number of students per group. Depending on the number of students enrolled determines the number of groups. Then the groups meet (either online or face-to-face) to plan roles for each week throughout the semester. Students rotate roles each week ensuring student role variability.

ROLES FOR LITERATURE CIRCLES

At the beginning of each semester, I post the role name and responsibilities within the online literature circle as follows:

Expectations for ALL Roles include: Demonstrates analysis of other's posts by extending meaningful discussion on previous posts, participation is evident throughout the entire discussion, responds to all posts on time, and there are 0-5 grammatical errors.

Discussion Director: The role of the Discussion Director is to provide 8-10 questions pertaining to the chapter. To get the highest amount of points they must have 5 higher-thinking questions and 3-5 Text-Dependent Questions. The questions must help the group better understand the text and asks group members to refer to the text. Plus, provide one comprehension strategy.

Summarizer: The role of the Summarizer is to provide a concise summary that includes all the main points of the text in a creative format, everything must be in chronological order, they provide guiding questions or prompts and are able to answer any clarifying questions. Plus, provides a strategy for retelling.

Word Wizard: The role of the Word Wizard is to provide ten terms or phrases relevant to the chapter. Out of those ten terms or phrases, five of them must be text-dependent vocabulary terms or phrases. In addition, provides a strategy for teaching vocabulary to a class.

Connector: The role of the Connector is to provide a strong detailed connection to self and real-world, provides a video or article that is connected to the text, and engages other group members in making similar connections to text/video/self and provides guiding questions for the video or article.

Literary Luminary: The role of the Literary Luminary is to provide 4-5 quotes from the chapter. The quotes are especially significant, descriptive, and/or controversial. Is able to tell the significance of the passages and provides an explanation of why they chose the phrases/passages they chose out of the chapter. Plus, provides guiding questions or prompts for others to respond to and make connections.

BENEFITS

Literature circles present a cooperative and participative active assignment throughout the collegiate classroom (Wood, 2018). Online literature circles provide many benefits, with one of the largest benefits being the convenience. Using an online version of literature circles gives quieter, reserved, and students that are less likely to speak up in class the opportunity to express thoughts and opinions without feeling the need to automatically and publicly respond to other classmates. Other students benefit from hearing the student's opinions and thoughts, while the teacher benefits from gaining insight on what the student knows. Stolle (2011) affirmed, "online literature circles provided students an alternative space for discussions where students could move away from oral communication that required immediate response to using the written word which provides more time for thought, reflection, and revision in one's response" (p. 22). Even though there are deadlines students can work online around their class schedules,

work schedules, family time, or even personal time. Some other important benefits of literature circles that I have witnessed and would like to expand are:

1. Critical Thinking
2. Collaboration
3. Personal Connections
4. Differentiation
5. Exposure
6. Accountability
7. Feedback

CRITICAL THINKING

The first of benefit of online literature circles is the improvement of critical thinking. As a teacher educator, critical thinking is an essential part of our curriculum, expectations, and outcome for our teacher candidates. Online literature circles help me achieve this goal without my teacher candidates even realizing it. Literature circles require each student to have a specific role and responsibility. Sanacore (2013) states, "...members of literature circles need to engage in reflective practices that help to strike a better balance of personal and critical responses to literature" (p.118). By engaging in reflective practices, students have to process the reading and understand it completely. Indeed one student stated, "It has taught me how to be creative, how to use higher order questioning, and how to make personal connections along with really understanding and comprehending the material in the chapter."

Students must be able to reflect upon their complete understanding to correctly organize the information in a way that completes their job within the literature circle. "Literature circles through the social forums of face to face and online are ways educators are preparing students to focus on their critical thinking through engagement" (Purifico, 2015, p. 8). Additionally, students have to think critically upon their understanding while responding to their classmates. Dr. Scavanaugh (2008) agreed, "literature circles provide a constructive educational opportunity for students to control their learning as they share thoughts, concerns and their understanding of the concepts, events, and material presented in the material being read" (para. 4).

A great example is the role of the Discussion Director. The role of the discussion director is to create 8-10 Bloom's higher-level questions. Out of those higher-level questions at least 4 of them are required to be text-dependent questions. Meaning that the participants must reread, refer, or cite the text to answer the questions. As one student told me, "Literature circles have helped me tremendously learn how to develop higher order thinking questions and make peers "think outside the box." There isn't simply just a "yes" or "true or false" "answer." By answering these higher-level questions, students are using critical thinking skills by analyzing the structure of the book, ideas, themes, or authors purpose. The online literature circles allow students the opportunities to seek answers otherwise impossible to be completed in class due to time constraints. Figure 1 is an example of excellent questions the discussion director provided their group members.

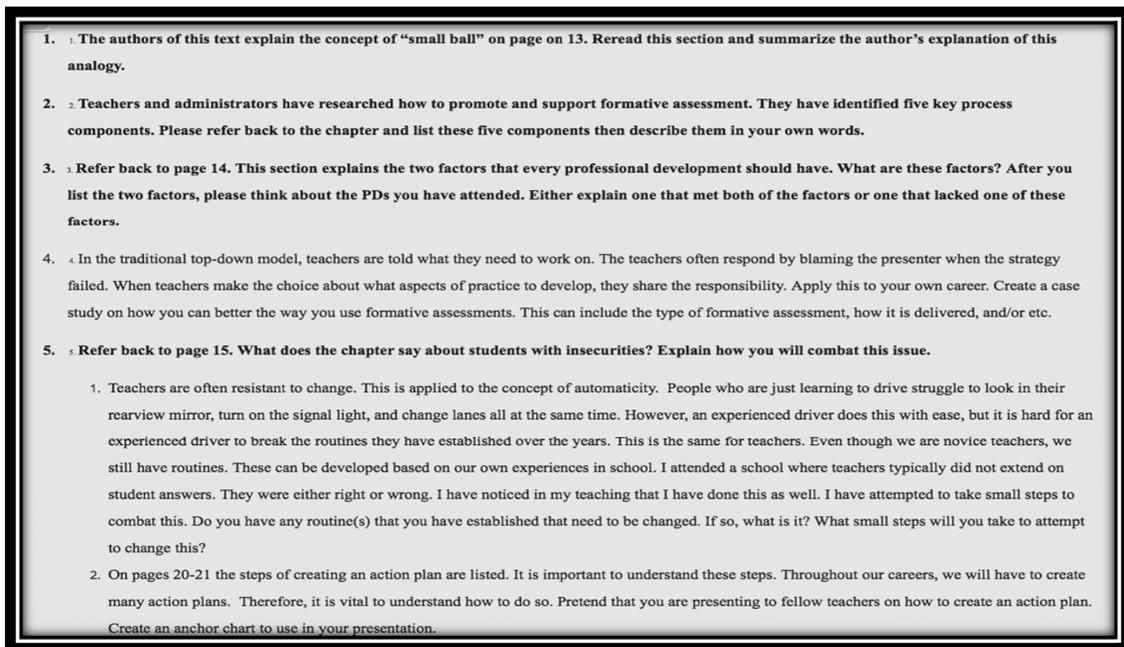


Figure 1: Discussion Director Post

With the teacher acting as a supporter, students can begin to guide their learning, which is an essential skill for all subject areas (Cox, 2018). During literature circles, children also learn how to generate their questions and seek feedback from others. This will help them develop their higher-order and critical-thinking skills. Finally, working with peers will help students develop and refine their communication skills (Javonsky, 2018). The following is a student quote who questions me constantly and says I make him do things no other professor makes him do such as reading, writing, responding, and be on time. So, this next quote says more than to me than you could ever imagine.

Creating questions that you know will be thoughtfully answered by your classmates brings a special kind of joy into your heart. It is a unique feeling that is not commonly felt. The individuality of the roles within the circles allows for an additional piece of pride to enter the sphere of the student’s horizons when they turn that assignment.

For literature circles to be a haven for cooperative learning, however, teachers need to model expectations and discussion goals (Aguilar, 2010). Robert John Meehan (2014) affirmed, “If real learning is to take place, our classroom must be dependent on the collaboration of its learners, not solely on the knowledge of its teachers.”

COLLABORATION

The second benefit of online literature circles is the collaboration that takes place amongst the candidates. Online literature circles enhance online learning as it makes the online aspect of learning interactive (Anderson, 2009). Literature circles provide students with cooperative learning and the power of free thinking. Students can express themselves within groups and share a commonality of education level, class and the reading assignment. Collaboration is at the heart of this approach. Hill (2001) notes, “Students reshape and add on to their understanding as they construct meaning with other readers” (para.3). Periodically, class time does not allow for peer interaction and peer discussion about the text.

Peer interaction is a vital part of feedback as peer feedback is important. Online literature circle's cooperative learning "Students help each other understand a text and make sense of it" (Aguilar, 2010, para. 5). Anderson (2009) concurred in that literature circles increase and enhance discussion participation and help students learn how to interact with others. A timid student once commented,

The thing I love most about getting to do lit circles is the fact that we get to interact with different people in our class other than the people we sit beside each day. It gives us the chance to get to know the other person just by their post and replies. Once your group gets the hang of how they work you can really start to connect with each other. For instance, in the beginning, your replies might not be personal because you do not know the other people in your group to well. After week three or so you start picking up on their reply and post styles and commenting back to them out of your comfort zone. This may only happen to me but, I feel like in most groups this is how it works. You are hesitant at first to let your personality shine through until you get comfortable.

One final important positive aspect of online literature circles, these activities provide the opportunity for students to see other students' points of view on the material they are all exploring. There are times that two people can read the same material but take the material two completely opposite ways; not saying one way is wrong but that there can be multiple views on one single text. Cooperative learning, especially online, can allow students to get comfortable talking about the text they have read. "Literature circles can be a place for cooperative learning...Literature circles teach kids how to use each other as resources and become independent learners" (Aguilar, 2010, para.5).

The role of the Literary Luminary has an important measure in the collaboration. They choose 4-5 quotes or phrases from the chapter that they feel are important and explains why they are essential to the understanding of content in the chapter. Next, they connect it to a theory/theorist and how they are related. Then they ask other members to articulate their feelings and thoughts about the quotes or phrases. Demonstrating an analysis of others' posts and extends the meaningful discussion by building on each member's posts. It is important to know that all group members are involved in the discussion, and each member brings a new perspective to the discussion. By working together and having constant communication, students become closer and feel like they can openly share personal connections.

PERSONAL CONNECTIONS

The third benefit of online literature circles is personal connections. These online discussion forums teach and enable candidates to make text-to-self, text-to-world, and text-to-text connections to the text they are reading. David Booth included Beverly Strachan's opinions on virtual literature circles in his book *It's Critical*. Strachan explains the purpose and goals of these discussion forums. Strachan provided an eighth-grade student's post about the book *Skinny bones and the Wrinkle Queen* by Glen Huser. This book features the adventures of an elderly woman and a teenager. This student made personal connections to the book. They wrote, "When my family and I went to go visit him in his nursing home a couple of times a year in Ottawa, he slept frequently so we could only see him for short periods of time, and sometimes he was in a grumpy mood and he did not want to see any company (just like Miss Barclay in Chapter 15)" (Booth, 2008). This student was able to read about the characters in the book and compare them to him and his family.

The Connector's responsibility is to provide a personal and real-world connection to the chapter, provide an article and/or video, and guiding questions to prompt members of their group to make similar connections. Readers often relate their background knowledge and experiences to what they are reading.

Sedita (2018), stated, "...educators have treated comprehension as a set of skills, when in fact comprehension depends primarily on what readers already know" (para. 2). Tompkins (2017) concurred, "The more background knowledge and prior experiences readers have about a topic, the more likely they are to comprehend what they're reading" (p. 260). On an end-of-course evaluation, a student avowed this supporting online literature circles, "A lot of times people post things that I may have overlooked or connect it to things I didn't think about before. I really like this feature because it opens your eyes to the endless possibilities and thoughts."

As future teachers, it is imperative that the teacher candidates experience, understand, and apply personal connections to a text so they can apply it in their own classroom. They must be able to make personal connections with their students and their story/text they are reading to pique their interest and aid their comprehension. Literature circles are fun, require in-depth reading, and a debate at times. They increase collaboration with their peers. A major challenge educators face today is how to differentiate instruction. What are ways we can teach every child can be successful? Online literature circles are definitely a method of teaching that differentiation occurs. Not only is it beneficial for struggling readers, but it also helps all students move beyond merely asking students to read and recall factual questions. It disrupts the monotony by making connections and gives purpose for reading which increases motivation and interest.

DIFFERENTIATION

The fourth benefit of online literature circles is that these can be differentiated for the needs of the students. Anderson (2018) explains that research supports online literature circles as beneficial for students with disabilities and general reading problems. Online literature circles offer all students opportunities to collaborate and be involved. The students who do not typically talk in class because of reading problems or shyness can do so online without these barriers. Online literature circles allow all students an opportunity to shine (Anderson, 2018).

So, what is differentiated instruction? Tomlinson (n.d.) defined it by stating, "Differentiation means tailoring instruction to meet individual needs. Whether teachers differentiate content, process, products, or the learning environment, the use of ongoing assessment and flexible grouping makes this a successful approach to instruction" (para. 1). When you think of the traditional method of teaching in college, what do you think of...lecture? True differentiation means not only differentiating the method of teaching but differentiating the content and the product. Differentiation can happen through online literature circles in many ways.

The first way is through drawing conclusions. Each student reads the chapter and then makes his/her original post. How they comprehended the material and drew conclusions will all be different based on the individual. The second way is through questioning. The discussion director, summarizer, word wizard, connector, and literature luminary all posted questions based on their role. This questioning can help lead to a better understanding of the content. This online discussion leads to students collaborating to support all types of learners to excel. The third way content can be differentiated is through their individual connections. Each student brings different experiences and knowledge to the literature circle. By reading and responding to each other's connections, it can help scaffold the new material with their prior knowledge, also known as schemata. The last differentiation is through their writing. Each role is as asked to put content in a creative way. Whether it be in tables, sentences, power

point, videos, or an online game-based classroom response system. The varied presentation or content can improve comprehension for all types of learners.

EXPOSURE

Exposure to literature is another key benefit of literature circles. It is crucial for teachers to provide students with a variety of genres, including non-fiction and fiction. This will ensure that every student can find a book that is interesting to him or her. Some struggling readers may even prefer non-fiction books (Aguilar, 2010). Javonsky (2018) wrote, “You want to provide a variety of reading genres and topics to ensure each type of student can have options of some interest to him or her” (para. 6). Reading a variety of genres will greatly aid student comprehension and allow students to interact with literature in a new and exciting way.

I use fiction and nonfiction books for literature circles. The type of book depends on the type of content I need to introduce or cover. One of my favorite literature circle books is *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio. This book does not support any *content* for my methods course. However, it provides a discussion of areas that I believe every teacher and future teacher needs to read. It talks about bullying, family, disabilities, and friendship. This, friends and colleagues, this is what I want my candidates to know what teaching is all about: It is ultimately about the impact that we have on our students. Some of the most important things in life cannot be taught from a textbook. It comes from our heart—love, empathy, and compassion—which I consistently strive to model for my teacher candidates. I tweak our literature circles for these types of books because I challenge them of ways they can use these books in their own classroom. What character counts, connections, real-world experiences can they teach by reading these types of books to their own class.

Other books I use for literature circles are informational books such as *Feedback: The Hinge That Joins Teaching & Learning*, *Thinking Through Quality Questioning*, *Checking for Understanding: Formative Assessment Techniques for Your Classroom*, and *Make Way for Literacy* to name a few. While these are all good books they would not be books I could use as method books, however, they contain wonderful supplementary material and information. So, I use them for my online literature circles to provide more detailed information about specific content the textbook touched base on, but did not provide enough information for future teachers. I look at items our students are held accountable for and sometimes struggle with due to lack of information or exposure to choose my literature circle books. By selecting these types of books, it holds our teacher candidates accountable for the content and schoolwork all at once.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Online literature circles and cooperative learning is a great way to hold students accountable for assigned readings. Students feel more obligated to thoroughly read and text and be ready to discuss it online when they know that they must submit a meaningful response to the text when their peers will be reviewing it. One thing I stress to my teacher candidates is the importance of annotating the text as you read it. Chunk it into a couple paragraphs or pages. This prevents them from passively reading and helps deepen their learning as they read. If I were to compare the accountability of online literature circles vs. a worksheet. It would be simple. With a worksheet, students may only find the answers and never even read the text. I feel worksheets are at the bottom of Bloom’s taxonomy because it is basically regurgitating

information. Most students answer the questions without even referring to the text. However, with online literature circles, students must read, reread and refer to the text several times to answer questions from different members of their group.

Online literature circles allow students to focus on a specific task for reading and a goal to pursue when reading. The pursuit of this task goal gives them a purpose within my reading of the chapter for the literature circle; therefore it substantially reduces the amount of my passive reading experiences. Candidates know that they are held accountable for their post and replies to other members in their group. This also makes students accountable for the quality of work that they provide for their literature circle group members. Students do not want to be embarrassed by the quality of posts or replies they provide in their group. They have a specific day the original post is due then their replies are due four days later. Not only that, they must make their posts in time to provide other members of their group enough time to make their replies to the original posts. This holds them accountable not only for their work but they want to pull their part and post on time so other members can reply and continue this online line collaboration and provide effective feedback.

FEEDBACK

The benefit I find most beneficial with online literature circles is the feedback. The importance of learning how to give constructive criticism, effective feedback, expanding on and to the meaning, and specific to the criteria is a critical part of teaching. This is definitely a part of literature circles that is preparing them to be effective teachers in the future. So often teachers think, “Good job!” “I like how you wrote your letters!” and “I like how you followed directions” is effective feedback. In reality, it is useless to the content learning. Yes, it is a type of feedback, but it is not relevant to student learning and outcomes. A student commented in class the other day,

Using literature circles in the classroom has taught me how to communicate by reflecting on a chapter in a book. It teaches me how to summarize and connect in a critical way that I have not always been good at. It also teaches me how to use my thoughts to comment on another student’s work. There are ways I can show my point of view without an argument. I really appreciate literature circles in the classroom.

A role in online literature circles that is crucial to feedback is the Summarizer. It is the Summarizer’s job to provide a concise summary of the critical parts of the chapter and provide guiding questions to help with the deepening understanding of the content. It is here where students cannot post comments such as, “Good job summarizing the chapter. You picked out all the important parts.” It is here where they lose points and I provide constructive criticism. Some examples would be, “Did you add meaning?” “There is nothing they left out?” “Can you expand on anything to add meaning?” I remind them that it is important for teachers to give effective feedback and provide guiding questions and to “...incorporate the suggestions because the tools increase student engagement and teach students to become more self-regulated, able to use peer feedback, and motivated to seek feedback from the teacher,” (Pollock, 2012, p. 8). A teacher candidate asserted, “They are an excellent way to receive feedback, collaborate with peers/colleagues, see the book from a different perspective, and challenges you with higher order thinking questions.”

One goal of mine is to join the discussion. Where I can give students appropriate feedback, extend his/her discussion, and provide encouragement to continue reading and posting. Due to time constraints myself, I have not been able to achieve this goal. However, I know as an educator that immediate

feedback is critical. When I provide a rubric a week later with specific feedback, it still not be enough. Especially for those students who not active during the whole discussion, or not putting as much effort in that week as expected. Usually, it is too late when I realize it, and I feel like I missed a true learning experience with future teachers. I miss the opportunity to show them what impact immediate feedback, analogies, praises, or just my presence can do to student work, attitude, and collaboration.

CONCLUSION

As a teacher educator, it is essential that I instill the importance and the love of reading to my teacher candidates. One way I have provided meaningful learning experiences through online literature circles. I have watched my candidates grow academically, personally, and professionally. By applying and modeling literature circles in my classroom candidates learned first-hand how vital planning, collaboration, and commitment comes with teaching reading. The empowerment of the online literature provides for my students, the content and myself is something that will keep giving as long as my teacher candidates are teaching. I think this student's comment about online literature circles sums it all up:

There are academic benefits and personal benefits to having literature circles online. Both academic and personal benefits play a large role in the success of literature circles. Having cooperative learning outside of the classroom, having the power of free thinking and conversation, and having freedom of choice are all beneficial to online literature circles.

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