



## Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups by Harvey Daniels

### Grading Literature Circles

Is it possible to grade students for their work in literature circles, over a whole book or a marking period? Yes, but do you really have to? It would be so much better not to grade literature circle work at all. Can't you base your grades on some other classroom activities, so that you don't undermine the genuineness of the book club conversation? So that you don't replace the collaborative culture you're trying to build with competition? I know, I know. You're working in a school district that requires grades for everything.

Okay, I give up. This is the sea we are all swimming in. But let's minimize the constant intrusion of scoring, points, and tests into the daily interaction of the circles. After all, if our kids' groups are really "hooked on books" and working well with one another, we don't need any grades for management purposes. We only need to sample their performance enough to feed the system whatever grades it requires. And since we also want to nurture a high level of self-evaluation and involve students in keeping their own records, whatever system we devise should have a strong component of student self-evaluation.

We've already warned about relying too much on book projects. So, if not a project, then what? How can we get a grade out of literature circles? A grade that is valid and meaningful, that doesn't distort the behavior of the groups, and that provides a credible report to the outside agencies watching over this classroom? "Performance assessment" may be the answer. And if you have ever read any restaurant reviews, you already know how it works. Most food critics have some kind of point system for rating the quality of a dining experience. One of our local restaurant mavens uses this scale: food = 10 points, service = 4 points, atmosphere = 3 points, value = 3 points.

When we move this kind of scoring into school, it is called "performance assessment." We call it this because this approach to grading asks, What are the ingredients of a successful performance in this activity? What are the ingredients of a successful informational speech, a successful science experiment, a successful research paper? As these examples suggest, performance assessment is especially suited to complex, higher-order thinking activities—like literature circles.

If we want to design performance assessment rubrics for literature circles, of course we can do it ourselves. But it is much more fun, and more educational, to create them with kids. Here's how we do it in some of our schools. After the students have been through one round of literature circles, we set aside a meeting to develop our own performance assessment rubric. Going back and forth between journal writing, talking with partners, and sharing as a whole class, we ask kids to develop a list of ingredients or components of "an effective member of a book club." As we share ideas, we help the kids winnow the list down to a reasonable number of entries, eliminating duplicates and gently discarding wacko suggestions. Here's the list one group of third graders at Waters School recently came up with:

## Traits of Good Book Club Members

Do the reading  
Listen to other people  
Have good ideas  
Ask people questions  
Stick to the book  
Dress nice

Actually, this third-grade list is pretty much what older kids usually come up with—except for the wardrobe entry. Now we ask the kids, Are all of these things equally important? Is dressing well for your literature circle meeting as important as having good ideas? No, no, they clamor. Okay. So now we announce that the rubric must add up to one hundred points, and we put kids in groups to propose point values for each component. Later, we reassemble as a whole class and haggle toward a point distribution agreement. Finally, we affirm the rubric; this is our scoring guide and we're sticking to it—at least until we revise it a month or two from now. When we're finished, we'll have something like this:

### LITERATURE CIRCLES SCORING GUIDE—Room 206

<u>Ingredient</u>	<u>Value</u>	<u>My Score</u>
Do the reading	25	
Listen to other people	15	
Have good ideas	30	
Ask people questions	15	
Stick to the book	10	
Dress nice	5	
Total	100	

Now, this is a good process. The whole time we are listing, debating, and valuing, we are actually teaching kids the ingredients of successful work, marinating them in the criteria of achievement. Indeed, this rubric-creation activity is just one of the very few instances I know of where assessment becomes part of instruction in a constructive way.

Once your own class rubric is created, there are several ways to use it. You can score individual kids yourself. Or both you and the student can each fill out a form and average the results. Better yet, you can have students score themselves and then meet with you to review their ratings. You can adjust scores up or down for off-the-mark ratings. Given the seriousness with which kids grade themselves, you'll probably be doing more raising than lowering.

Now let's return to that mythical parent conference where Dad is demanding to see proof that Junior deserved a C in literature circles. You have all the kid's reading log entries, stamped and dated, you have a stack of observation forms bearing on his thinking and interacting skills, and you have a performance assessment rubric based upon clear criteria for achievement. Next!