



# Looking into Literature Circles

Harvey Daniels



## Introduction

Book clubs are forming in classrooms all across the country, with small groups of students from kindergarten through high school leading their own lively literature discussions. This promising movement draws many of its key ideas and management procedures from Harvey Daniels' book, *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom*. But teachers who are new to literature circles sometimes have questions that no book can quite answer:

What do the groups look like? How do they operate?

What kinds of questions do students raise when running their own discussions?

What is the atmosphere in the room during literature circle meetings?

And what is the teachers' role in all of this?

*Looking into Literature Circles* answers these questions by providing a window into book clubs in action. Rather than focusing on management details, this video conveys the feel, the atmosphere, the climate, and the energy of literature circles at work. We visit three public schools: a third-grade dual-language program, a high school English class, and a parent book club meeting. In each location, we see and hear students (and parents) running their own conversations, digging into books, and connecting them to their lives. Along the way, Harvey Daniels points out some key organizing structures, including response

logs, role sheets, and Post-it notes. Kids tell us how they feel when working in a book club, enjoying natural, open-ended conversations about books with their friends. Teachers show how they form and support groups, keeping the structure fresh and productive. And parents testify not just about the benefits of their own literature discussions but also about how school book clubs can cause a rebirth of reading by all family members at home.

## What Are Literature Circles?

Literature circles are powerful small-group structures for reading and discussing fiction or nonfiction texts at all grade levels across the curriculum. Literature circles elegantly combine two very important educational ideas: collaborative learning and independent reading. Simply defined, literature circles are student-led discussion groups of three to six kids who choose and read the same article, book, or novel. To ensure active participation and self-sustaining conversation in these groups, we ask students to prepare for each meeting either by keeping a response log, jotting discussion ideas on Post-it notes, or filling out “role sheets” that help readers harvest their responses while reading. The circles meet regularly and students use their notes to feed the discussion. When they finish a book, each circle typically reports the highlights of their discussion to the whole class or creates a formal project that shares their learning. Then these small groups dissolve, students select more readings, and new groups are formed around those choices.

Literature circles can be organized in a wide variety of ways, but the consistent key elements are:

- Students choose their own reading materials.
- Small temporary discussion groups are formed, based on book choice.
- Grouping is by kids’ text choices, not by ability or other tracking.
- Different groups read different books.
- Groups meet on a regular, predictable schedule to discuss reading.

- Kids write notes that help guide both their reading and discussion.
- Discussion questions come from the students, not teachers or textbooks.
- Personal responses, connections, and open-ended questions (not formal literary analysis) are the starting points for discussion, which may then move to literary analysis.
- The teacher does not lead the groups; instead, he or she visits, serving as a fellow reader and problem-solving facilitator.
- When books are finished, each group shares with the class through presentations, reviews, dramatizations, book chats, or other projects.
- New groups form around new reading choices and another cycle begins.
- A spirit of playfulness and sharing pervades the room.
- Evaluation is by teacher observation and student self-evaluation.

## Who Is This Video For?

This video is designed to be viewed by individual teachers or by groups of teachers who want to know how literature circles work—how they look, sound, and feel in real classrooms. Probably many of our viewers are either considering implementing literature circles or have recently done so and are working through the related management issues in the classroom. Of course, you can watch this video on your own and hopefully learn a good deal. But if a group of colleagues watches the video together, the experience can lend itself to an engaging, interactive, multi-step workshop. This video is also for administrators whose support we need to help purchase multiple copies of good books for classroom libraries, to fund related staff development, to free us to visit each others' literature circle classrooms, and to set up author visits and other events that support book clubs. This video also speaks to parents; it shows what their kids are doing in the classroom, it invites parents to come in and help, and it encourages them to join in family and community reading groups themselves.

## How to Use This Video in a Workshop Setting

We believe the very best way to use this video is in the context of viewers joining in some literature circles themselves. The benefit seems obvious, especially for teachers: if we have a chance to discuss some good literature in a peer-led format ourselves, we'll be better able to translate this structure to our students. No, you don't have to read *War and Peace* or form a long-term book club to try this out, although once you try literature circles for yourself, you may do just that!

So here's a complete workshop that integrates the video. If you do all three parts of the workshop, it will take the better part of a day. But you can also mix and match elements of the workshop to fit the time you have.

### PART I

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#### *Before Viewing the Tape: Try Out a Literature Circle*

1. Read a good, really short short story, something one or two pages long. (Sandra Cisneros has several such stories in her collections *The House on Mango Street* and *Woman Hollering Creek*). First, read the story silently and then, in groups of four or five join in open-ended discussion for about ten minutes; simply invite people to talk freely about wherever the story took them.
2. Stop the group meetings, and ask each circle to share one thread or sample of their conversation: something that got discussion going, generated some feeling, sparked a disagreement, or otherwise got people engaged. (In this step, we are honoring the literature first, before we start analyzing the discussion process—a vital element in all literature circles' training for kids or grownups.)
3. Now, stop and ask everyone to reflect back on their short group meeting, looking for two things: What were the *social skills* used to make this discussion work? And what were the *thinking skills* used to comprehend and talk about the story? Have each group think back on their brief meeting, making a list of ingredients

- they noticed, perhaps by dividing a sheet of paper in half and listing Social Skills on one side and Thinking Skills on the other.
4. Now create a whole-group list by inviting people to contribute items from their small-group lists. Tackle social skills first; digging out thinking skills is usually a bit harder, since these are generally deeper and more implicit. Here is a list of social and thinking skills developed by a group of teachers in a recent workshop:

### **Social Skills**

take turns  
listen actively  
make eye contact  
lean forward  
nod, confirm, respond  
share air-time  
include everybody  
don't dominate  
pull other people in  
don't interrupt  
speak directly to each other  
receive others' ideas  
be tolerant  
honor people's "burning issues"  
piggyback on ideas of others  
speak up when you disagree  
respect differences  
disagree constructively  
don't attack  
stay focused, on task  
support your views with the book  
trust each other  
be responsible to the group

### **Thinking Skills**

make connections with personal experience, current events,  
other books, authors, other stories, artworks

make pictures in your head  
visualize the scene, people, events  
put yourself into the story  
reread to clarify  
check and confirm facts  
savor the story, language, events  
question the author, characters, text  
analyze, interpret  
make inferences  
draw conclusions  
make judgments  
evaluate the book, author, characters  
attend to author craft and style  
notice words and language  
read passages aloud  
look for patterns  
draw/illustrate/map sections of text

5. As you look at the lists you have created, an important point should become clear: a lot of deep and relatively sophisticated social and thinking skills actually go into the making of a successful peer-led book club. This means that in the classroom, we must either teach social and thinking skills to students or provide structures that supply them, or a mixture of both. In one sense that's what literature circles' training really consists of: creating an environment that optimizes and improves kids' social and thinking skills.
6. Talk about how these discussion and reading skills could be developed among your own students. What do they already know how to do? What skills need to be added?

## *PART II*

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### *Preparing to View the Video*

1. Before watching the video, you may want to have participants read Chapters 1–3 in Harvey Daniels' *Literature Circles*. These

- three chapters provide a basic description and definition of the strategy, illustrated with classroom stories at several grade levels.
2. After reading the chapters, have participants discuss their own experiences with literature circles or reading discussion groups in their classrooms. If they have already tried some form of literature circles, ask them, What is going well? And what needs work? What do they still have questions about when it comes to fostering good talk about books in their classroom? If they haven't yet tried book clubs, ask them, What problems can they foresee cropping up among their own students?

## *PART III*

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### *Watching and Discussing the Video*

The video has five main sections:

Introduction  
Third-grade literature circles  
High school literature circles  
Parent literature circles  
Closing

1. The video is only fifteen minutes long, which allows for multiple viewings in a short period of time. You may want to begin by viewing the video once straight through with the group for enjoyment, asking for general impressions of the literature circles at the end.
2. After a brief discussion of the first viewing of the video, you can ask participants to focus on specific skill development with a second viewing. Ask them to keep a double-entry journal with two columns, one for Social Skills the other for Thinking Skills. As they watch the three literature circles groups in action, have participants keep a list of the social and thinking skills being developed by the different age levels.

Here's a typical response to the high school segment on *Journey of the Sparrows*:

## **Social Skills**

- taking turns
- building on the ideas of others
- drawing others into the discussion
- being prepared with questions and topics
- being comfortable with pauses and silence
- taking personal risks
- being respectful of differences in the group

## **Thinking Skills**

- clarifying facts
- asking questions
- connecting to personal experience
- speculating
- analyzing
- visualizing (drawing)
- questioning

## **What About the Role Sheets?**

Viewers familiar with Daniels' book *Literature Circles* may wonder why there's little use of role sheets in the classrooms on the video. That's because, since the book was written, so many teachers have found easier and more natural ways for kids to capture their responses—and because the role sheets have proven to be problematic in many classrooms. As you decide how to prepare your own students for literature circles, please consider the following alternatives carefully.

When students are first learning to operate in peer-led discussion groups, it can be helpful to offer some intermediate support structures to make the transition comfortable and successful. That's why some Chicago teachers originally came up with role sheets with tasks like "Connector," "Questioner," and "Illustrator." These roles give a different, rotating task to each group member, setting a cognitive purpose for the reading and an interactive one for the group discussion.

All of these roles are designed to support genuine collaborative learning by giving kids clearly defined, interlocking, and open-ended tasks. The sheets also enact a key assumption about reading: that readers who approach a text with their prior knowledge activated and with some clear-cut, conscious purposes will comprehend more. So the role sheets have two purposes: to help kids read better and discuss better.

But we have learned to be cautious. When “doing the sheets,” rather than discussing ideas, becomes the main purpose of literature circles, you can accidentally create just one more mechanical, spiritless classroom assignment. Indeed, the single greatest problem with literature circles in classrooms around the country is overuse of role sheets and the consequent limiting and numbing of the conversation. So we’re really serious when we say *use the role sheets with care*. The role sheets are to be used as transitional, temporary devices that help students internalize, through practice, the several perspectives and habits the roles teach.

When used for initial training, role sheets should be promptly abandoned as soon as groups can have lively, text-centered, multifaceted book discussions drawn from open-ended entries in response logs. How do groups reach this stage? Perhaps by using the roles for a week or two, repeatedly adopting a half-dozen different angles on reading, stretching their repertoire of group discussion roles, and practicing within a safe structure until less guidance is needed. Once kids have used a variety of roles and had some successful group meetings, then the structured roles are unnecessary, and wise teachers phase them out, replacing them with a reading log. After all, the goal of literature circles is to have natural and sophisticated discussions of literature, and once that is happening we want to remove any artificial or limiting elements immediately.

Most of the teachers who originally contributed to the book *Literature Circles* have since stopped using role sheets altogether. Instead, they simply begin with reading logs, and we now recommend this approach. If your students are already accustomed to discussing rich, open-ended questions about their reading and/or are veterans at keeping reading response logs, they won’t need any role sheets to get

going on literature circles. In fact, many teachers have started literature circles and reading logs at the same time, introducing the idea of recording one's thoughts, questions and doodles during and after reading, and then using the kids' fledgling journals as the basis for small-group talk.

## Extending the Learning Beyond the Workshop

1. Form a weekly discussion group to discuss a whole book about literature circles (see the Further Reading list below for resources).
2. Initiate a weekly literature circle for interested teachers or parents.
3. Video sample literature circles from classrooms for future discussion or analysis by the group.
4. Brainstorm good short pieces to use in introductory literature circles at different grade levels.
5. Link the social and thinking skills listed with district, state, and national standards.
6. Discuss different formats and possibilities for using literature circles in content areas.
7. Join us on-line at [www.literaturecircles.com](http://www.literaturecircles.com) for advice, new resources, and support.

## Further Reading on Literature Circles

- Daniels, Harvey. 1994. *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
- Daniels, Harvey, and Marilyn Bizar. 1998. *Methods that Matter: Six Structures for Best Practice Classrooms*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
- Hill, Bonnie Campbell, Nancy J. Johnson, and Katherine Schlick Noe. 1995. *Literature Circles and Response*. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon.
- Samway, Katharine Davies, and Gail Whang. 1995. *Literature Study Circles in a Multicultural Classroom*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.

Schlick-Noe, Katherine, and Nancy J. Johnson. 1999. *Getting Started with Literature Circles*. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon.

## **Staff Development on Literature Circles, Literacy, Curriculum Integration and School Leadership**

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