Literature Circles 2.0

Updating a Classic Strategy for the 21st Century

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Introduction

Literature circles are a technique that brings small, heterogeneous groups of students together to discuss texts of their own choosing (Whittaker, 2012). Literature circle groups are typically comprised of four to six students, with each member assigned a role in advance that ensures balanced participation and equal opportunities for sharing ideas, expressing interpretations of texts, and responding to the contributions of others in the group.

Research shows that the incorporation of literature circles promotes student self-determination (Blum, Lipsett, & Yocom, 2002), benefits students with special needs (Anderson & Corbett, 2008; Blum, Lipsett, & Yocom, 2002), exposes participants to multicultural texts, views, and perspectives (Coles-Ritchie, 2013; Martínez-Roldán & López-Robertson, 1999), and develops reading enthusiasm (Whittaker, 2012). As such, the incorporation of literature circles has the potential of promoting literacy and language learning in inclusive classrooms with students from diverse cultures and learning needs.

In this article, the authors propose a new take on traditional literature circles—which we call *Literature Circles 2.0*—by

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recognizing the importance of technology as a vital literacy skill in this new era of education. The advances in technology make the exchange of information an instantaneous process where collaboration, critical thinking, and intercultural communication are essential skills.

Thus, the authors identify and illustrate the potential of *Literature Circles 2.0* in educating students with the capacity and knowledge they need to be successful global citizens in today's multicultural world. This article explains and proposes an

updated approach to teaching reading and literacy to students from diverse educational and cultural backgrounds, taking as a focal point the importance of technology, multiculturalism, and 21st century skills.

The Traditional Approach to Literature Circles

The traditional method of using literature circles was first described by Harvey Daniels (1994). In the model proposed by Daniels (1994, 2002), students select their own reading materials (perhaps from a set

Table 1

Roles in Traditional Literature Circles vs. Roles in Literature Circles 2.0

Roles in Traditional Literature Circles (Daniels, 1994, 2002)	Roles in Literature Circles 2.0
Discussion Director: Oversees the discussion and holds group members accountable.	*Project Manager*: Helps group members coordinate responsibilities, mediate conflicts, and meet deadlines.
Connector: Identifies elements in the text that relate to students' lives, other texts, and world events.	*Trend-Spotter*: Uses internet and media resources to connect to background knowledge, other texts, and other content areas to explain and make prediction about the book.
Questioner: Raises questions to clarify, analyze, and critique the text.	*Bias Detective*: Critically questions the text to raise issues of the influence of the author's or character's perspectives and biases.
Illustrator: Develops a graphics or nonlinguistic interpretations in response to the text.	*Graphic Designer*: Uses technology to develop graphics or nonlinguistic interpretations in response to the text.
Summarizer: Prepares a summary of the assigned reading.	*Tweeter*: Prepares a 140-character overview of the assigned reading, perhaps utilizing hashtags or links to make wider connections.
Researcher: Finds and shares background information about a topic related to the book.	*Investigative Journalist*: Checks facts in the book, and finds information that will help the group understand it more completely.

of book options the teacher has previously introduced to the class) and form small groups based on book selection. Each group within the classroom reads and works with a different book, meeting regularly during class time to hold natural discussions about topics they generate themselves.

The teacher acts as a facilitator and may assess students through observations, but is not a participant in any group. When students have finished reading and discussing their books together, they make presentations about their book to the whole class, and then students generate new groups by picking another text to read. Though not named by Daniels (1994, 2002) as a "key ingredient" of literature circles, one of the most abiding elements of the model he proposed is the use of defined roles to guide student participation.

See Table 1 for a listing of possible roles to be used when engaging students in discussion of fiction (also see Barone & Barone, 2016; Daniels, 1994, 2002; Whittaker, 2012; and Wilfong, 2009, for additional roles, including roles to be used when discussing other types of texts). As students progress through the book, they rotate among the various roles to guide their reading and participation in discussion.

Though some have criticized the use of roles and role sheets (e.g., Lenters, 2014; Lloyd, 2004) because they have the potential to lead to stilted conversations that amount to checking off responsibilities rather than rich, text-driven, student-centered conversations, we advocate for the continued use of roles as an element of literature circles.

By giving students a specific role, teachers provide instructional support by limiting the pupil's focus as they read and discuss with their group. The skills required to accomplish the tasks associated with each role (for instance, asking critical questions or noticing important passages) are natural to proficient readers. For emergent readers, taking on a role provides them an explicit directive to draw on and strengthens their still-developing literacy skills. For students from non-majority backgrounds, taking on a role also serves to make expectations for appropriate behavior more explicit, a consideration that will be discussed in more detail below.

Literature Circles 2.0

For over two decades, the traditional approach to literature circles has been used successfully in many contexts, including with bilingual first graders (Mar-

tinez-Roldán & López-Robertson, 1999), middle schoolers (Blum, Lipsett & Yocum, 2002; Burns, 1998), students in content-area classes (Wilfong, 2009), adult learners (Beeghly, 2011), and preservice teachers (Vaughn, Allen, Kologi & McGowan, 2015). The method is a powerful way to develop and support students' literacy and interpersonal skills. The pervasiveness of technology in the 21st century; however, means that many aspects of the traditional approach are likely to feel stale to today's students.

To help students develop 21st century skills like communication, collaboration, and critical thinking, as well as to make the roles more relevant and appealing to today's students, we have infused engagement with technology into the *Literature Circles 2.0* role descriptions, as seen in Table 1. For instance, whereas the traditional role of Discussion Director asked students to manage the flow of the discussion, the 2.0 role of Project Manager positions students as mediators of conflicts and helps them practice and develop skills to support their engagement with people of different backgrounds.

Whereas the traditional role of Illustrator asked students to prepare a non-linguistic representation of elements from the text, the 2.0 role of Graphic Designer asks students to do so through using technology and graphic design skills. As a final example, where the traditional role of Questioner asked students to inquire about

the text, the 2.0 role of Bias Detective prompts students to actively and critically question the author's and the characters' perspectives and potential for bias. See Figure 1 for an example of the updated roles proposed in *Literature Circles 2.0* and described in Table 1.

The list of roles we provide here is not meant to be exclusive; rather it is intended to serve as an example of potential roles that might work in your classroom. We invite you to try them out and work with students to develop other possible roles. Students can also be invited to develop and suggest roles based on their own interests, strengths, and needs (see Stein & Beed, 2004, for an example of student-generated roles). What is important about the shift between traditional roles and 2.0 roles is the inclusion of collaboration, the acknowledgment of diverse perspectives, and the infusion of technology.

Using Literature Circles 2.0 in the Classroom

Today's classrooms are more linguistically diverse than ever, and the use of technology offers students the possibility of drawing on their multilingual skills as a resource for improving their learning process (Van Laere, Rosiers, Van Avermaet, Slembrouck & van Braak, 2017). As such, the inclusion of technology-embedded learning environments in

Figure 1
Literature Circle 2.0 Roles

Literature Circles 2.0 is not only germane, but also necessary.

In this section, we introduce three activities educators can use in their classrooms which incorporate a variety of technology tools that are interactive, engaging, and offer a space for cooperative learning. These activities are inspired by Fisher and Frey's (2003) *Gradual Release of Responsibility* model with the vision of mentoring students into becoming capable thinkers and learners who can handle tasks individually and collaborate effectively with others. These activity designs can be used sequentially as a scaffolding technique to build toward increased student independence and ownership, or they could be used simultaneously as a differentiation tool to address the needs of students with varying abilities and work skills.

The flexibility of literature circles and the activities introduced below allow for the inclusion of multicultural reading materials, academic grouping based on reading and literacy skills, as well as diversified assessments at different grade levels and for students of all age groups.

Something to consider when implementing these activities is that literature circles can be challenging if implemented without proper guidance and mentoring. Students need to know what is expected from them before they embark into this social experience of communication and literacy building. Hence, it is essential that educators intentionally develop a system where the implementation of literature circles becomes an organized and understood activity by every participant in the classroom.

Teacher-Planned Inquiry (I do)

The Teacher-Planned Inquiry allows educators to use this approach to reach/evaluate various objectives. For this activity, *Edmodo* or *Google Classroom* prove highly effective in maintaining detailed communication with students in a virtual environment that can be accessed inside and outside of the classroom. When implementing the teacher-planned inquiry activity, educators assume the responsibility of assigning texts to each group and preparing specific questions that help students focus on selected details of the reading.

Similarly, *Google Quizzes* or *Quizlet* flashcards and tests can be incorporated to ensure that each participant in the literature circle is contributing and understands what they are required to accomplish in their role. The purpose of Teacher-Planned Inquiry is to guide participants as they process specific information from the reading. (See Appendix A for a template that can also be incorporated into *Edmodo* or *Google Classroom.*)

Group-Driven Inquiry (We do)

Group-Driven Inquiry is intended for more self-directed participants who are already familiar with literature circles and can work independently. The goal of this activity is to discover information through the participants' results in the form of blogs or websites. Therefore, participants are given the flexibility to choose a text themselves based on relevance to the information learned in class and/or to their peers.

High-quality informational texts can be found online in *Newsela*, *Google News Archive*, *DOGO News*, and *News in Levels* (for English Learners). Once literature groups select their reading material, participants communicate to identify information that needs to be included in the final project (blog or website).

Something interesting about the Group-Driven Inquiry is that each participant has a responsibility to contribute to their blog or website in a unique manner (for example, the Graphic Designer is responsible for incorporating graphics and nonlinguistic interpretations into the website or blog). (See Appendix B for a detailed and ready-to-use worksheet corresponding to this design.)

Individual Discovery Inquiry (You do)

Individual Discovery Inquiry is the most challenging activity of the three and can be used with responsible students who have advanced reading levels and who can work independently. For this exercise, students are asked to dissect the assigned or chosen reading material by fulfilling two to four roles of the *Literature Circles 2.0* described above. These roles can be assigned by the teacher or can be chosen by the student.

The Individual Discovery Inquiry activity proves engaging for gifted students who prefer individual work and who appreciate challenging reading materials. An important aspect of this activity is that it needs to be explained in detail to avoid confusion. Educators should offer one or two guiding questions per role to focus students' attention as they fulfill the various tasks. At the end of the activity, students will be asked to create an infographic in Canva answering each question. (See Appendix C for an example of the Individual Discovery Inquiry activity.)

Literature Circles 2.0 and Multiculturalism

Literature circles are a powerful approach to use within diverse settings for two reasons. First, literacy practices are inherently culturally embedded, and students may struggle as they begin schooling with home literacy practices that may not match the practices emphasized in school (Heath, 1983). Literature circles are effective instructional tools that address this challenge. Because literature circles are student-directed, they provide students with space to enact the literacy practices of their communities.

When implementing literature circles in a first-grade bilingual classroom, Martinez-Roldán and López-Robertson (1999) found that students from English-speaking homes focused their discussion primarily on the text, while students from Spanish-speaking homes focused their discussion on opportunities for storytelling about their own lives and the lives of their family members. This echoes Heath's (1983) finding that children from a minority community were accustomed to storytelling traditions that did not match the more textually-focused literacy practices emphasized in U.S. schools.

By providing opportunities for students to direct the focus of their discussions, the use of literature circles gives students space to enact literacy practices from their communities, offers validation for those practices, and allows students to build on those literacy practices to continue to develop literacy skills.

Second, literature circles make the rules of engagement in discussions more explicit. This is particularly important for students from minority backgrounds who might come to school with a discourse style or code that is different from that of mainstream U.S. culture (e.g., Bernstein, 1964). All students enter school with linguistic resources, but some groups' linguistic resources are different from others.

Historically, this difference has been cast as a deficit (e.g., Hart & Risley, 1992). It is important that teachers resist this type of deficit thinking by drawing on students' linguistic resources while also teaching the language of school (Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009). Literature circles offer teachers an opportunity to explicitly teach the discourse patterns of schooling to all students.

This explicit instruction in academic English discourse patterns is particularly important for English learners (ELs), who draw from dramatically different linguistic and social resources, and who may have experienced interrupted formal schooling. The structure and explicitness of literature circles make them a highly effective practice for this vulnerable student population (Keisler & Bowers, 2012).

Conclusion—Final Thoughts

Literature circles are a reading and literacy-building strategy that has been implemented successfully at different grade levels and with students of diverse backgrounds since it was first described by Daniels in 1994. The flexibility of literature circles has allowed educators across contexts to modify this activity to better fit their students' needs.

In this article, we offer a fresh and updated perspective on how to use this activity in your classrooms, acknowledging that technology, multiculturalism, and 21st century skills are essential skills in today's learning environments. The three activities introduced in this article seek to offer guidance and shed some light on the numerous opportunities *Literature Circles 2.0* have in meeting the ever-growing literacy demands of today's classrooms.

These activities can and should be modified to meet each teacher's needs and to better serve their student population. We hope that teachers and students find in *Literature Circles 2.0* an opportunity to continue engaging in meaningful reading using skills that are present and necessary in their everyday lives.

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Appendix A
Teacher-Planned Inquiry

Student Names: *Title* (Provide Link for online material):
Class: *Author*:

Task #1: After reading, answer the "Circle Questions" below in group and answer independently the questions assigned to your role. The Project Manager will post these answers in our Edmodo/Google Classroom page once completed.

Circle Questions   1.   2.   3.

Roles   *Role-Specific Questions* (to be completed by student)
Project Manager
Trend-Spotter
Bias Detective
Graphic Designer
Tweeter
Investigative Journalist

Task #2: Each participant will complete an after-reading evaluation found in Quizlet/Google Quizzes to assess understanding of the text based on their specific roles.

Roles   *Links for Online Quizzes* (to be completed by student)
Project Manager
Trend-Spotter
Bias Detective
Graphic Designer
Tweeter
Investigative Journalist

Appendix B
Group-Driven Inquiry

Student Names: *Title* (Provide Link):
Class: *Author*:

Tasks

(1) Search for an online text of your choice about cultural diversity and multilingualism. You may find high-quality informational texts in Newsela, Google News Archive, DOGO News, News in Levels, among other trusted online websites.

(2) After reading the text and communicating with your team, create a Blog or Web Page that portrays your understanding and takeaways of your text.

(3) Each participant will explain in detail his/her contribution to the Blog or Web Page.

Explain in detail your contribution to your group's Blog or Website

Project Manager   Trend-Spotter   Bias Detective

Graphic Designer   Tweeter   Investigative Journalist

Appendix C
Example of Individual Discovery Inquiry Activity

Individual Discovery Inquiry – Guiding Questions

Title of Text/Reading:

Author:

Student Name:

Bias Detective:
Raise an issue you found when reading your text.
Why is this an issue? Suggest a possible solution
for this particular issue to the author.

Tweeter:
Prepare a short and relatable overview about the text (in 140 characters or less) that you would share in Social Media outlets. Incorporate hashtags or links as needed to make connections with your social media audience.

Trend-Spotter:
Share an online resource that was particularly helpful
in understanding the text. Why was it helpful?
How was this online resource used?

Investigative Journalist:
Choose a passage you want to learn more about in your text and research it online. Why did you find this passage interesting?
What did you find about it?

Project Manager:
Reflect about the experience of approaching the text from different roles. Identify a glow and a grow that you can learn from for future reading assignments.

Graphic Designer:
Create an infographic in *Canva.com* answering each question. Share the infographic with the class in our online classroom and/or present it orally.