

# Questions and Answers

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## Continuing conversations about literature circles

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■ As we began discussing this first column, we found ourselves talking about the importance of questions and answers and the contributions of both to our professional development as literacy educators. We contemplated whether the expert's answers or the novice's questions lead to more critical thinking. We mused over whether answers promote or constrain professional development and talked about the kinds of questions that stretch rather than limit inquiry and growth. Soon we were involved in a real conversation from which a goal emerged. We realized that we want the column to be an invitation for readers to join us in probing, ongoing conversations about literacy instruction.

Once our goal was apparent, a topic for the first column came quickly. We decided there could be no better starting point than the literature circle, the grand conversation itself. Peterson and Eeds (1990) coined the term *grand conversations* because participants are invited to develop and discuss their own questions and answers in ways that expand upon individual interpretations and elevate responses to reading.

Literature circles, in their various forms, are topics that frequently appear as part of professional conferences, books, and journal articles. Questions and responses about literature circles continuously reappear on the RTEACHER

listserv, the electronic conversation for *The Reading Teacher*. Six of 12 recent issues of this journal have included at least one article on the topic. Classroom teachers are implementing literature circles at all grade levels, teacher book groups are forming in many systems, and teacher educators are using literature circles in undergraduate and graduate courses as vehicles for discussions. Literature circles present questions that literacy professionals are eager to explore. They epitomize the goal for this column because the dynamics of these grand conversations can promote insights, perhaps even revelations, related to reading, writing, learning, and thinking.

Questions asked most frequently about literature circles focus on procedural aspects. How many students are in a group? What texts should I use? How do students prepare for literature circles? How do I make adjustments for struggling readers? Certainly these are important things to ask. Fortunately, many educators are willing to share their answers to these questions. However, wholesale borrowing of literature circle procedures that have been fine-tuned for someone else's classroom can result in superficial practices that have little to do with the essence of the endeavor. Decisions about literature circles made by others can and should promote action, but they cannot be taken as prescriptions for implementation. If literature circles are to be used pow-

erfully, they must be designed and applied in ways that reflect students' needs and embrace the challenges from which they emerged. Therefore, we will set aside procedural questions temporarily to explore critical questions about what purposes literature circles serve for students and why they are positive components of literacy instruction.

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### Why are literature circles important?

Skillful reading features accurate and automatic word recognition, but, just as important, it is marked by an intimate engagement with text. Skillful readers make predictions, construct visual images, create connections to personal experiences and other texts, monitor their reading and whether it makes sense, solve word- and text-level problems in flexible ways, summarize as they go, argue with the author, and evaluate content and writing style. In short, skillful readers take ownership of their reading and construct meaning in active and careful ways. Literature circles are important because they promote these active and thoughtful stances toward reading.

In literature circles, the students' insights and inquiries, not the teacher's list of questions, drive the discussion. Literature circles serve as launching devices or scaffolds that help students generate ideas and their own thoughtful conversations about what they have

read. Scaffolds are usually defined as conversations and interactions in which adults temporarily support children's development of more complex thought and language (Bruner, 1978). Literature circles, however, go a step further as scaffolds by providing conversational structures that help both students and teachers break away from typical classroom discourse patterns in which students respond only to the teacher's probes. Literature circles support the repositioning of stances that control talk in the classroom, allow students to take responsibility for developing and discussing their own questions and interpretations for texts, and launch more complex levels of thought, language, and literacy for students and teachers.

Numerous articles in *The Reading Teacher* and elsewhere (see Sidebar) confirm the contributions that literature circles make to the development of thoughtful and probing readers at all grade levels, and these articles provide different answers to the procedural questions. All of them, however, show us the essence of literature circles in action. Routines and procedures vary, but the purpose for literature circles remains constant: Readers come together to build conversational skills for talking about texts in enlightening, personal, and thoughtful ways. We feel that we must keep the purpose for literature circles in mind to avoid a narrow focus on procedures that can result in losing sight of the needs and purposes that gave life to literature circles in the first place. Procedural questions and answers are important, however, because they provide beginning points for action. But as we turn to the "how" questions, we will attempt to situate answers in a context that continues conversations and extends explorations about why literature circles are important.

### How many students are in a group?

Although four to six is often recommended as the number for students in literature circles, grand conversations can take place with as few as two readers or with a whole class. What is more important than the number of students is how the circle size affects student interactions. Literature circles need to be configured so that the size of the group

## Other books, articles, and Web sites for explorations of literature circles

- Baumann, J.F., Hooten, H., & White, P. (1999). Teaching comprehension through literature: A teacher-research project to develop fifth graders' reading strategies and motivation. *The Reading Teacher*, 53, 38–51.
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- Keegan, S., & Shrake, K. (1991). Literature study groups: An alternative to ability grouping. *The Reading Teacher*, 44, 542–547.
- Lehr, S., & Thompson, D. (2000). The dynamic nature of response: Children reading and responding to *Maniac Magee* and *The Friendship*. *The Reading Teacher*, 53, 480–493.
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- Menon, M.B., & Mirabito, J. (1999). "Ya' mean all we hafta do is read?" *The Reading Teacher*, 53, 190–196.
- Samway, K.D., & Whang, G. (1996). *Literature study circles in a multicultural classroom*. York, ME: Stenhouse.
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- Saskatchewan Education. (1997). *Introduction to literature circles*. [Online]. Available: [www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/docs/mla/circle/intro.html](http://www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/docs/mla/circle/intro.html) [2000, May 1].
- Short, K., & Pierce, K. (1990). *Talking about books: Creating literate communities*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Spiegel, D.L. (1998). Silver bullets, babies, and bath water: Literature response groups in a balanced literacy program. *The Reading Teacher*, 52, 114–124.

does not interfere with the readers' opportunities to become increasingly adept at expressing interpretations of texts and responding to the contributions of others in thoughtful, respectful, and probing ways.

### What texts should I use?

Typically, literature circles are formed to discuss novels. However, other texts such as picture books, poems, chapters in a textbook, and newspaper articles may be used. For teachers, professional books or journal articles may serve as the reading materials for literature circles. Although participant choice of texts is a defining feature of many literature circles, selections are often constrained by availability of multiple copies or learning goals aligned with curriculum. Students frequently choose

from teacher-provided text sets that focus on a theme, an author, or a genre. More important than type is the quality of the text. Is it a text that relates to critical issues and experiences in readers' lives and provokes deep reflection, questioning, and discussion?

### How do students prepare for literature circles?

Scaffolds that readers use to prepare for literature circles may take the form of print materials or routines. Sometimes readers get ready for discussion by assuming different roles such as discussion director, vocabulary enricher, illustrator, and connector and then completing an assignment sheet to prepare for the role (Burns, 1998; Daniels, 1994). In other cases, readers simply write down their own questions or ideas as they read. We

have heard student-formatted contributions referred to as long, fat, literary, and evaluative questions or as seeds, prompts, and springboards for discussion. Students may also note interesting, wonderful, "wow" words or phrases and words that need clarification and then use these selections for vocabulary study during circles. We have seen students develop character webs, copy passages they find well written, and locate examples of specific literary techniques such as alliteration, simile, or metaphor in readings. We also have observed lots of variations in ways students record preparations for literature circles. Some readers jot down comments on notes that they stick to the text, others use some form of reading log, and some map thoughts on a large sheet of paper. Across all methods and routines for preparation, the important thing is that scaffolds are provided to promote active and thoughtful stances toward reading and position each reader as a major contributor to literature discussion.

These scaffolds are important because they help students and teachers move toward "grander" conversations; however, they are intended to be flexible and temporary and need to be updated periodically to match evolving needs and insights of readers. Just as important, scaffolds should be eliminated when students and teachers have internalized them and no longer require their support. Hanging on to scaffolds, such as roles and assignment sheets, for too long can lead to discussions that sound more like scripted exercises than the lively grand conversations that the scaffolds were developed to facilitate (Daniels, 1999).

### How do I make adjustments for struggling readers?

In most literature circles, students determine the amount of text to be covered for each meeting, and they independently read and prepare for discussion. Not all students are equipped to take on this independence, however. Struggling

readers are often disadvantaged and silenced by procedures that require them to discuss text with classmates who read more quickly and proficiently. Scaffolds and routines that offer alternatives to independent reading may be necessary to address these needs and engage all students as readers. Teachers may provide opportunities for students to hear the text read aloud or on tape, participate in paired reading, or read texts chorally. Some students need not only assistance with reading, but also with preparing for discussion. In an issue of *Primary Voices K-6* devoted to "Talk That Empowers Struggling Readers," teachers describe adaptations of literature circle procedures that enable struggling readers to become the group's authority on the text (Beed, 1998).

Teachers who use roles as scaffolds for discussion may implement a two-step plan in which circles are arranged first with students sharing the same role. In these groups, students gain competencies that allow them to talk about their role confidently when they form circles with students in different roles. Other teachers provide modeling and guidance as needed when students select their own formats to record questions and ideas for literature circles. The important thing about adjusting procedures for struggling readers is that scaffolds are adapted so each group member receives the support needed to read the text in active, reflective ways and can come to the circle prepared to participate as a fully fledged, contributing member.

### The ongoing challenge

We encourage readers to add their voices and make this conversation about

literature circles ongoing. Therefore, we will conclude with questions rather than answers. What scaffolds for literature circles help you and your students think, probe, and talk about text? How do you adjust scaffolds to match increasing competencies and evolving needs of students? What qualities of text forge connections so powerful that students are compelled to ask critical, thought-provoking questions? Can the dynamics of discovery inherent in literature circles become a standard rather than a departure for classroom discourse? We invite you to add questions to the list and find answers by continuing this conversation in schools, at conferences, on the RTEACHER listserv, and in professional readings and writings that ask why literature circles are important and how they can promote ever more active stances for reading and interpreting literature.

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