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Using Literature Circles to Help Students Gain an Authoritative Voice in Research Writing

Amy Huntley

The first time I graded high school research papers, I thought I was going to die before I finished. My students demonstrated little understanding of the concepts we had discussed in relation to writing on researched subjects. Unable to make sense of the overwhelming quantity of information they had amassed, students generated messy, disorganized reports. They had not mastered the creation of an argumentative thesis, let alone demonstrated the ability to support that thesis through their research. With an aching head and a burning desire to throw sixty terrible papers into the fire, I immediately began replanning how to teach the research unit to my next year's freshmen.

Recreating the Process

My unhappiness with my teaching of the required research unit was not my only frustration with my first year of teaching Literature and Composition 9 in my district. I was also unhappy with the availability of literature that my students could read and understand without teacher-directed activities. So was another teacher in my district, Julie Toma. Together we enlisted the aid of Dr. Sue Steffel of Central Michigan University to help us as we merged our two goals for ninth graders:

- a better research unit
- a greater use of literature ninth graders at various reading levels could read and understand on their own.

The three of us met several times over the next six months to discuss pieces of young adult literature and, after making a comprehensive "wish list," we applied to the Okemos Education Foundation for a grant to provide books for an integrated literature circle and research unit. The books we selected needed to:

- represent a large variety of reading levels
- lend themselves easily to research and critical thought
- represent a variety of subjects and genre
- represent variety in sex and ethnic background for main characters.

Next, Julie Toma and I generated a class structure using literature circles that was based on the Illinois Writing Project's "Literature Circles: A Collaborative Reading/Writing Activity." We modified some of the literature circle roles to meet the needs of our classroom, but maintained our own versions of a Discussion Director, a Passage Master, a Character Captain, and an Illustrator.

Before students selected their literature circle books, I gave them research topics that might relate to each of the literature circle novels so that students could consider both their research and reading interests in determining which books they wanted to read.

Julie and I hoped that by using literature circles in connection with the research process, we

could help students become experts on their novels. We also hoped that once they became experts on their novels, they would feel entitled to write about their research in an authoritative voice. In my previous research experience with students, I had discovered that the time allotted for research did not allow students to learn enough on any given subject to become true experts. Expertise is essential to the creation of a real argumentative thesis (a curriculum requirement for the research project in my district at the ninth grade level). Thus, students struggled throughout the entire process to create any kind of interesting or unique thesis. Since students could not become experts on any subject they researched in the library and out in the electronic world in only a few weeks, we turned to literature circles as a part of the research unit, hoping students could become experts on how the information they learned in their research was related to their novels. This way they could create research papers with argumentative theses that were based on their novels.

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how the literature circles helped support the research process, not to describe the literature circle format used within my classroom. For more information on how to create literature circles, I recommend Harvey Daniels' *Literature Circles*.

How the Literature Circles Prepared Students to Write a Better Research Paper

I had been promised by many that literature circles would promote student-directed learning and increase student engagement. All those accolades to literature circles—some made in professional writings, some made in teacher's lounges during informal conversations—turned out to be justified. My students struggled and learned together how to take charge of their own learning. They worked in small groups to figure out what the text actually said when they didn't understand it; they figured out ways to resolve conflicts over ideas and text interpretations; they strove to improve their group dynamics by becoming aware of the impact their body language had on their discussions; they

figured out how to encourage quiet classmates to talk more; they learned how to incorporate "wait time" into discussions so that the more verbal students didn't always dominate. After each literature circle, we talked together about what had worked, and what hadn't, in that day's discussions. And I, as often as I possibly could, rejected the role of text authority in the classroom.

"What does this word mean, Mrs. Huntley?" a student would ask me occasionally, pointing at a line in the literature circle book.

"How can your group determine that?" I would ask.

On another occasion a group asked for clarification about why a character behaved in the way she did.

"Your group will have to decide that," I told the students. "Where can you look in the book for clues that might help you make that decision?" Three students, including the one who had asked the question, instantly had ideas about where to go in the text to look for clues in constructing an interpretation. They debated these various passages, and their significance, at length.

The students did, indeed, become experts on their literature circle selections. They spoke with confidence about both the things they liked and disliked in the books. This status as "Expert on Novel" became crucial when students started doing their research and writing their papers. Students could speak with confidence about how information was portrayed within the literature circle novel. Amanda used the following thesis for her paper:

Treatment of slaves in the book Nightjohn relates to what slaves really went through and how they were actually treated.

Another student argued:

Though Victor Hugo occasionally portrays Gypsy's culture and lifestyle correctly, there are many inaccuracies in his portrayal throughout his novel [The Hunchback of Notre Dame].

The Use of the Research Journal in Brainstorming for the Research Paper

The literature circles were the first step in getting students to think critically, through group discussion, about their research issues. But I still regarded it as only the beginning. I wanted students to continue to think critically as they turned to doing non-fiction reading in their research. My past experience with the traditional note-taking method of creating bibliography cards had taught me that students were gathering information without thinking about its relevance—until they started writing the research paper. To encourage students to think about the information they were researching before the drafting stage, I required them to keep a journal.

I asked students to make the first page of their journals a numbered list of each reference they found. The list was to be made in Works Cited format, except that it would not appear in alphabetical order. New references could be added to the first page as students found them. On each successive page of the journal, students were then asked to record the number of the source they were taking notes from, key information they found in that source, their thoughts about that information, and any connections they saw between that information and their literature circle novels. This is where students ended up doing much of the brainstorming for their papers.

Many of the minor arguments students used in supporting their thesis statements first showed up in the research journal. For example, Taylor, who had read *Ender's Game* and was researching self-esteem, took many notes on alienation in her journal. After those notes about the roots of alienation in psychological development, she wrote:

When Ender is on Earth, in regular school, he receives no challenges, makes no connections, and is alienated by his peers. In battle school, the adults/administrators deliberately alienate Ender and other kids as well. This is the exact opposite of what teachers must do. No connections or links are initiated and by turning the majority of the kids against Ender,

they are actually preventing links from being made. As a result of these actions, Ender struggles to make connections, friends, a sense of belonging, throughout the novel.

These thoughts helped Taylor later determine her thesis:

The home and social environments in which he [Ender] inhabits negatively influence his emotional health.

Taylor went on to support this thesis by devoting a section of her paper to the research on alienation. She then demonstrated how Ender's experiences illustrate what psychologists understand about the connection between alienation and mental health.

I also used the journals to trace how the research process impacted students' understanding of their literature circle books. One student, Elaine, complained that the book *Eva* spent too much time describing how chimpanzees groomed one another. She gave the book a mediocre rating after finishing it. A week later, as I was examining her research journal in the library, I noticed that she had dedicated a substantial portion of it to the subject of grooming.

I asked, "Elaine, why have you spent so much time on this subject when you thought that was part of what made *Eva* boring?"

"But Mrs. Huntley," Elaine said, "it turns out that grooming is **really** important in chimpanzee life."

Elaine's research paper thesis, not surprisingly, became:

Throughout the novel, Eva, chimpanzee behavior is very accurately portrayed.

Almost a third of her paper supported this thesis with an examination of the research on grooming and examples of how grooming was used in the novel.

Final Reflections

I was ultimately much happier with the research papers I received from this method of teaching than I was with my first attempt at teaching the research paper. Not every student managed to master all the elements of research writing with this

strategy, but all students did better writing on this paper than on any other *formal* paper we did during the year. The opportunity to read novels of their choice, and at their reading levels, helped them become authorities on their subjects, and that in turn allowed them to write with confidence.

Another benefit to the unit was the circular fashion in which the reading of the novel informed students' research, and the research enhanced their interpretations of the novel. Students throughout this unit demonstrated in a delightful way the ability to think through the relationships existing between fact and fiction.

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About the Author

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