# 4 Voices: Literature Circles in the Learning Commons

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Within a Learning Commons, new relationships are formed between learners, new technologies are realized and utilized, and both students and educators prepare for the future as they learn new ways to learn (OLA, p.3, 2010).

*This article describes the collaborative process by which Literature Circles were launched and continued in the Library and Classrooms by the Teacher-Librarian, In School Support Teacher, and 2 classroom teachers (one gifted class and 3 mixed-ability grade 8 classes). Common goals included addressing the needs of learners at diverse reading levels, improving reading comprehension/interest in reading, enhancing communication and increasing meta-cognition of reading strategies. The article describes planning and initiation and includes teacher reflections on logistics, assessment and student achievement.*

We met as a group to discuss and plan implementation of literature circles. That group quickly became a team as resources, knowledge and experiences of literature circles were shared, debated and discussed. Meshing common goals, theoretical knowledge and practical experience, we refined roles and assessment tools and determined logistics of implementation.

**Familiarizing Students With Roles and Strategies**

Students became familiarized with roles in 2 double periods in the library, with the teacher-librarian and classroom teachers. In the first period, students were asked to reflect in small groups on prior knowledge of literature circles (*What do you know about literature circles?*),

knowledge and use of reading strategies (*Which reading strategies do you know and use to help you understand what you're reading*?), and the connections between the two (*How do you think literature circles and reading strategies are related? How do you think literature circles help you to understand what you're reading*?). Whole class responses were shared and discussed, making connections to Peel District School Board's reading comprehension strategy posters. We observed that students were able to list some strategies and several of the roles but made few references to practicing strategies within roles.
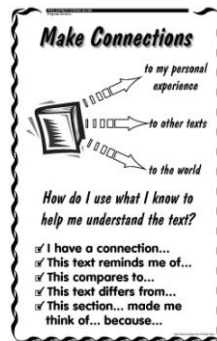


Providing two cloze exercises, differing in degree of difficulty (Wilde, 2000), helped to illuminate the importance of strategy awareness when loss of comprehension occurs. Teachers noted that many more students consistently made references to strategy awareness and use in subsequent role responses.
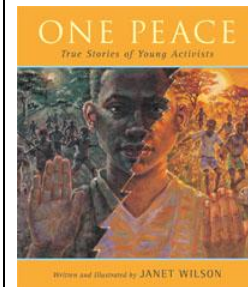


During the second period, students shared in reading (via document camera and LCD projector) a short non-fiction text from *One Peace: True Stories of Young Activists* (Wilson, 2008) about Craig Kielburger and his initiative, 'Free the Children'. After reading, two roles were introduced:

Word Wizard and Happy Highlighter, emphasizing connections to reading comprehension strategies. Half the class completed the role of Word Wizard and the other half engaged as Happy Highlighters.

For the 3rd and 4th periods, 3 new roles were introduced: Discussion Director, Powerful Profiler and Cool Connector. Following familiarization with the roles, students and teachers again engaged in shared reading of a text—this time a story based on the life of Iqbal Masih, entitled *The Carpet Boy's Gift* by Pegi Deitz Shea. The same procedure was followed as for the first two roles, in terms of sharing and assessment which is explained below.
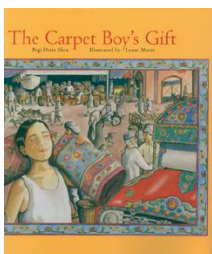


**Encouraging Respectful Sharing and Active Listening**
Sentence starters for encouraging respectful dialogue were explained and placed on each table on tent cards prior to role sharing. Responses seemed slightly unnatural at first when using the sentence starters but the prompts proved helpful in terms of encouraging consistent and respectful responses. A checbric completed by teachers and students after sharing aided in providing immediate descriptive feedback for goal setting in terms of norms of communication.

**Choosing and Chunking Books**

This school library has an abundance of literature circle sets! Using teacher knowledge of student initiative, ability levels, reading interests and social factors, groups of 5 students or less were formed. Each group was given a choice of 5 book sets selected to meet their needs and interests. Students individually rated each book based on readability and interest. After individual evaluation, groups shared their ratings and reached consensus on their choice. This is a highly structured approach, but we were responding to the strengths and needs of our students. For some students, this was their first time engaging in literature circles. With experience, students will be given more autonomy in terms of book and group selection.

Following book choice, groups divided the book into 'chunks' for reading, and decided on roles for each chunk. Giving students responsibility for determining which roles would be prepared by whom and by when encouraged accountability in terms of role completion. Students expressed their disappointment when a group member was not prepared to share, and that member, feeling the weight of that disappointment, would scramble to remedy the situation by completing their role. Essentially, the scheduling ran as such: read, prepare (role), share, reflect. Reading was assigned for homework; sharing and reflecting took place in classrooms and the library.

Having much prior experience with literature circles, the students from the Gifted class noted that literature circles were often too slow moving and not reflective of their reading interests and styles. So, we responded by speeding up the 'read, prepare, share' cycle and allowed them to choose their own groups and books.

**Observation and Assessment**
Peer, self and teacher assessments of role performance were based on a rubric, and focused on descriptive feedback (How can we improve our performance and enhance our understanding of the text?). Rubrics were written in student friendly language to encourage accurate self assessment and goal setting.

Benefits of providing descriptive feedback and goal setting with students were readily apparent. In students' first group share, a student stated his 'connection' which was something similar to: 'The main character has a friend named Mike and I have a friend named Mike too'.

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When asked, "How does that help you to understand the character and the story? How is your friend Mike like the Mike in the story? ". Unable to respond fully to the questions, he indicated an understanding that more would be required of him as part of a group that was relying on him to enhance their understanding of the text, as well as his own. In subsequent meetings, his role responses demonstrated a greater commitment to improving his own understanding of the book, use of strategies and as a contributing member of his group. This also provided an opportunity for teachers to explain to students the difference between assessment *for* learning and assessment *of* learning.

In order to reduce noise levels and increase teacher feedback, 2 groups engaged in literature circle sharing in the library, with T-L observing, while other groups shared in their classroom

*When students understand what is important, they have an opportunity to assess their own efforts in regard to the criteria, and give themselves specific, descriptive feedback about their own learning as they progress. ( Davies, 2007, p. 35)*

with the classroom and support teachers observing. Teachers took turns observing various groups, which allowed for teacher moderation and greater consistency of assessment and evaluation. It also provided variety of venue and audience for students, which proved to continue the novelty of the experience.

Some students needed more prompting in groups to expand on their thoughts and

benefited from jotting down their thoughts from discussions on their role sheet *after* sharing. Our assessment and feedback took into account both oral and written responses in order to focus on enhancing reading comprehension, rather than just written expression of it.

## Making connections with Authors and Technology
We were able to incorporate one of the Forest of Reading nominated books *The Shepherd's Granddaughter (Carter, 2009)* and used http://ed.voicethread.com/ for secure online discussions. We arranged for the author to visit and this provided added incentive for reading with understanding. The students valued the opportunity to pose questions derived from circle discussions and receive an answer directly from the source!
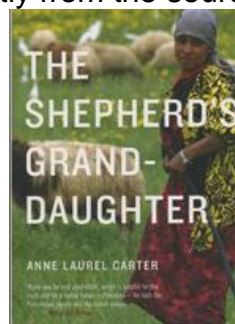


We envision incorporating increased use of technology and communication with

authors in our future literature circles. The students nearly always completed the reading, which speaks to appropriate book choice—but had not always prepared for roles in written form. This tells us that we need to continue to provide multi-modal options and a variety of authentic audiences.

Some exemplars gathered this year will be shared with students in future literature circles. In addition to sharing written exemplars, we plan to use the document camera to record video exemplars of students engaging in literature circle discussions. Future groups will view the exemplars and use the experience to co-construct criteria for assessment and evaluation tools.

## Growing as Learners and Taking Initiative

We were inspired by the depth of response and discussion, and the support students provided each other. Discussions provided opportunities for students to go beyond retell,

grappling with issues presented and making connections to themselves and the world.

It was apparent that all benefited from the structure provided by organizers initially, but it was also apparent that as familiarity grew, some students were restricted by organizers in terms of space and creativity. Some of those students took the initiative to use the organizers as a guide and typed or wrote out responses on their own. It is ideal when students know and respond to their learning styles!

Students chose culminating tasks to complete and share individually, in partners, or small groups. Tasks provided students opportunities to demonstrate understanding of text using strengths across multiple intelligences. Again, self, peer, and teacher assessment took place, with known criteria. Student demonstration of creativity and understanding was exemplary.

Displays of sharing and culminating tasks in the library pique the interest of other students and teachers.

The success of literature circles hinges on collaboration and flexibility. Investing time before, during and after ensures consistency, specificity and success for students.

Literature circles can be a hard sell in Intermediate, but teachers envisioning success for students=success. By far, the greatest reward was witnessing growth in learning and the supportive environment in which that occurred—for teachers and students.

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**About the Authors:**

**Andrea, Cindy, Amanda and Maureen have over 40 years teaching experience combined and have taught in Peel and abroad, grades K-8.   They hope you enjoy this article** ☺

**PS—They are now embarking on info circles, and continue to incorporate technology and descriptive feedback.**