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Reading Motivation: A Study of Literature Circles

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Abstract

Motivating students to complete assigned reading has long been a struggle for teachers at all educational levels. This article describes research related to one method used to motivate students to complete assigned reading.

Introduction

Students are often reluctant to complete independent reading assignments in content area texts leaving content area teachers with few options. Teachers may continue to assign independent reading with the hope that some students will complete the reading or abandon reading assignments and simply provide students with pertinent information. However, Brozo & Flynt (2007) tell us teachers wishing to create literacy assignments steeped in motivation and engagement will use some form of collaboration to motivate students to read. This collaboration can take many forms. Flynt & Brozo (2009) explain that the best content literacy teachers use reading, writing, speaking and listening as methods of engagement. One strategy which motivates students to read independently is the use of literature circles. Literature circles combine the necessary elements of reading, writing, speaking, and listening into one successful package.

Literature Circles Defined

Literature circles (Daniels, 2002) are small, student-led discussion groups in which members read the same book. Group members take on various 'roles' that guide the reading and the discussion. Group members are asked to prepare for and contribute to the discussion. Each group member becomes an expert at his or her assigned role. (Miller, Straits, Kucan, Thrathen, & Dass, 2007). Collaboration is central to achieving successful literature circles. (Klage, Pate, & Conforti, 2007). This collaboration is constructivist in nature, allowing students to increase knowledge while the teacher reinforces this new knowledge base. That is, the students are actively involved in the learning process using their collaborative discussions to construct new knowledge. The teacher monitors the discussions while offering substantive feedback as necessary. Rather than prescribing new knowledge, the teacher allows the students to add the new knowledge to their amassed prior knowledge. Wilfong's (2009) research reported that students using literature circles displayed increased excitement about discussing questions and

listening to the opinions of others. Klage, Pate, & Conforti (2007) add that this type of collaboration has been shown to increase motivation.

Literature Circles: Beyond the Literature Classroom

Literature circles emerged from the literacy classroom with a focus on fictional literature. However, this successful strategy has been recommended for the content area classroom where most reading material is from a non-fiction informational text. (Daniels & Zemelman, 2004; Miller et. al, 2007). Literature circles were used in a science classroom by Devik-Fry & LeSage (2010). These researchers found that the use of literature circles helped students internalize big ideas about science while also providing opportunities for critical and inductive thinking. Further, they added that literature circles “blend science inquiry, literacy, and sociolinguistics and constructivist learning theories” (p.40). These findings suggest that literature circles provide a social, student led environment for the exploration of non-fiction text. Vygotsky (1978) advocates the development of these social contexts for learning which are developed within literature circles.

Ketch (2005) suggests the use of literature circles as one method of creating classroom conversations, positing that these conversations are a critical part of learning in order for students to make sense out of their own world and help them support or reject new ideas. This is supported by Routman (2000) who states, “All learning involves conversation. The ongoing dialogue, internal and external, that occurs as we read, write, listen, compose, observe, refine, interpret, and analyze is how we learn” (p. xxxvi). Further, conversations also allow students to take ownership of the learning process (Ketch, 2005). McCall (2010) supports this idea adding that in social studies classrooms literature circles encourage “authentic student-led discussions and interactions rather than the prevalent teacher-centered, question-and-answer exchanges” (p.153). When students are given the opportunity to take on leadership roles in small group discussions, they are taking ownership in their own learning (McCall, 2010). This ownership might lead students to be more motivated to read assigned material.

Research Question

The purpose of this study was to determine if the use of literature circles using non-fiction texts in a university classroom would motivate students to read more of their assigned reading material. The research question for the study was: Does the use of literature circles by university students for non-fiction textbook discussions motivate students to complete more assigned reading?

Participants

Participants consisted of 34 students, 18 undergraduate and 16 graduate, enrolled at a regional university in either an undergraduate course titled *Literacy Development in the Content Areas* or a graduate course titled *Literacy Seminar*. Both courses are part of programs leading to initial teacher licensure and focus on strategies for content area reading.

Procedures

Participants were assigned to literature circle groups of three based on their content area. For example, students seeking teaching licensure in math were grouped with others seeking that same licensure. This grouping ensured some level of common ground on which to build the

collaboration necessary for the use of literature circles with connections to their chosen content area.

The groups were assigned to read each chapter in their textbook, complete the literature circle role sheets for that chapter, and participate in a group discussion during regularly scheduled class periods. The role sheets were adapted from the standard role sheets described by Daniels (1995, 2002) to include examples of non-fiction questions on the Discussion Director role sheet. Each role allowed students to examine and analyze the assigned text from varying perspectives (Kilbane & Milman, 2010). The selected roles were:

- Discussion Director: This role's function is to create open-ended questions related to the text read.
- Word Warrior: This role's function is to identify previously unknown or intriguing vocabulary within the text.
- Passage Picker: This role's function is to identify pertinent passages to review and share with the group.

The different roles have varying functions but all serve to help students deepen their own level of understanding, or create prior knowledge connections to the content (Miller et. al., 2007). Devik-Fry & LeSage (2010) believe that specifying roles and tasks helps to compensate for the varied levels of prior knowledge students bring to the text. By narrowing the reader's focus, the role serves as a filter for constructing understanding. The roles challenge students to go more in-depth with their class preparations and not just scan the text. As the students take turns filling all the roles, they are actively participating in gaining new knowledge. Students must take turns leading and contributing to the discussions, asking and responding to questions, and sharing pertinent passages of text as they critically consider the reading assignment (McCall, 2010).

Findings

Participants were asked to complete a short online survey at the end of the semester. All thirty-four participants completed the survey. The survey contained questions related to the amount of reading the students had completed during the course and attitude toward the literature circle experience.

When asked if participating in the literature circles had motivated the students to read more of the assigned textbook reading for the course, 97.1% responded positively. Further, 88.2% responded positively when asked if they read a greater percentage of the assigned textbook reading when compared to reading assignments in other courses.

When participants were asked what percentage of the assigned textbook reading they had completed using literature circles, 88.2% reported that they had read 90% to 100% while only 32.2 % reported reading 90% to 100% in other courses.

In addition to survey question responses, participants were given the opportunity to comment about their experience using literature circles. When asked to select three words that best described the use of literature circles, 73.5% selected the word "collaborative," 58.8% selected the word "motivational," and 32.4% selected the word "focused."

These three themes also emerged from the open response questions. Participants commented they were more motivated to read textbook assignments due to the need to be prepared for class and discuss the reading. Some students felt a responsibility to their group members and others felt peer pressure to be prepared. Students believed the literature circles gave them a specific purpose for reading and that with literature circles they knew exactly which text to read. Additionally, the students commented on the community aspect of using literature circles. The students believed that they had developed relationships with their classmates and enjoyed collaborating. Some students enjoyed hearing the opinions and varying perspectives of their peers.

Comments made by students regarding motivation:

- It makes you read the chapters in order to fill out the literature circle sheets.
- I was responsible for my group and not just myself so I did work at a higher level.
- It forces you to read the textbook. I don't usually read any of the textbook, but to come up with things to discuss in the literature circles, I had to read the textbook.
- It really gets folks to read the assignments.
- It forces me to pay attention and not just read to say that I read the material.
- Participating in literature circles motivated me to read the assignment and think more about what I was reading.
- Literature circles forced me to do the reading because I don't like to look silly in front of my peers. I worked hard during the reading to be able to participate in the discussions.

Comments made by students regarding collaboration:

- Being able to get other's input helps you get the most from the reading.
- It gives you a chance to discuss the reading.
- You can learn from other group members.
- It allows you to hear other's ideas.
- I loved discussing the passages with others.
- I enjoy collaborating with others, so the literature circles were helpful to me.
- Literature circles allow for relationships to develop.
- We were able to help each other.
- Literature circles get the entire group involved and thinking.
- I loved hearing other's opinions on text material. It provides opportunity for open discussions.
- I'm more likely to talk about things I don't understand in front of a small group who I got to know well.

Comments made by students regarding focus:

- It makes you look for main points in the text instead of just skimming over it.
- It caused me to look closer at the text for my assigned part.
- The different roles help you focus on different aspects of the text each time and helps keep things interesting.
- I had a purpose to my reading because I was looking for specific things to fill out my literature circle sheet.
- It breaks up the reading into different parts.
- It helped me to focus on the material and break down the information for better understanding.
- It caused me to know exactly why I was reading the material.

Conclusion

This study demonstrated that college students did complete more of their assigned textbook reading when using the literature circle strategy. This is a direct response to the central research question posed by this study: Do the use of literature circles by university students for non-fiction textbook discussions motivate students to complete more assigned reading?

University instructors who have been frustrated with lack of motivation of students to complete reading assignments should consider using literature circles in their classroom. Literature circles, widely used in middle and secondary literacy classrooms, can be successfully in college classrooms. The successful implementation of literature circles described in this study provides evidence that literature circles increase reading motivation, promote collaboration, and provide a purpose for completing reading assignments. The results of this study will hopefully encourage other instructors to implement the use of literature circles in their college classrooms.

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