

## **Literature Circles, Roles, and Technology: A Technology Enhanced Strategy for Engaging Students in Text Analysis**

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The literature circle strategy is one that promotes students' higher level thinking and literacy skills (Daniels, 1994) providing a way for students to engage in critical thinking and reflection as they read, discuss, and respond to books or other reading materials. Today's literacies go beyond paper to include multimedia, reading from computer screens and personal devices and include media, technology, information, and other critical literacies (Semali, 2001). This paper describes how teachers can integrate the role-based technology enhanced or integrated literature circle to help teachers and students interact in a meaningful way in the discussion of literature, integrating media technology to better engage the student in the process. The paper also provides sample role sheets for classroom use along with links to other role sheets. Resources are provided concerning online available of free and open source texts in English which can be used as the literature source. The use of roles has also been found to be an effective collaborative group tool, allowing all of the group to work on a similar goal while allowing for individual assessment.

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The literature circle was first introduced in 1994 through Harvey Daniels's book, *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups*. Literature circles may be known by many different names including literature studies, literacy circles, book clubs, literature discussion groups, and cooperative book discussion groups. All literature circles share the following three basic elements: diversity, self-choice, and student initiative (Daniels, 1994). Literature circles are student-centered collaborative book discussion groups where each student has a role for which he or she is responsible. Using

the literature circle concept teachers can accommodate a wide variety of student reading levels and abilities. During the discussions, students are active and focused on interaction and building on the contributions of others in the class (Moore, 1993) and students usually find dialogue with their peers to be a motivational aspect of a course (Oblinger, 2005). The available range of technologies that are available, can allow this dialogue to take many forms and, given the human preference for novelty, should take multiple forms. While some students may prefer not to take part in online group work, possibly because of personal choice, or because of negative experiences that they have had before in classes (Taylor, 2005), the initial use of roles with their individual assessment and accountability can usually mitigate the issue. The use of roles or job aids in a literature circle promotes reading, writing and listening skills. Research is found literature circles to be successful as an education tool for reading literature as well as technical or content area reading.

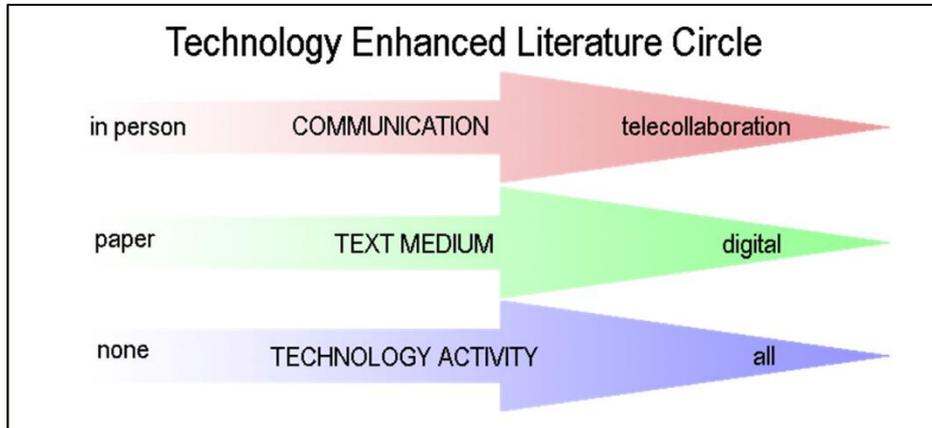
Computer and internet technologies can assist today's students in reading and comprehension and be integrated into a literature circle approach. A U.S. National Reading Panel Report from the National Institute for Literacy discussed the motivational effect of computers and stated that the "rapid development of capabilities of computer technology, particularly in speech recognition and multimedia presentations, promises even more successful applications in literacy for the future" (p. 6), the report also discussed positive applications of word processing, multimedia software, and hypertext toward reading instructional tasks (NIFL, 2002).

## **1. Integrating Technology**

The application literature circles with technology can be integrated into the wide variety of today's classrooms, from fully face-to-face to fully online (see Figure 1.2). In some of the circle activities, the teacher and students can interact with each other in an online environment. These activities provide teachers and students with experiences to see how technology-enhanced activities could be used in distance learning student situations.

**FIGURE 1**

**Dimensions of Using Technology In The Literature Circle (Cavanaugh, 2006).**



Teachers can integrate technology into the literature circle along any or all of three facets: communication between students; the material being read; and the student activities. The range for communication goes from members participating in person in a classroom to a student who participates through telecommunications. The text material used for the literature circle can range from paper-based text, to fully digital text, such as ebooks. For the activities, students can participate with just the paper and pencils that they already have, to integrating activities that use technology such as search engines, paint programs, concept mapping software or websites, digital recording, and chat software. These technology activities can range from having no technology activities to using just a few activities, such as for a one computer classroom where students would need to take turns, to having all activities integrate technology where students have one-to-one computer access. To help students with reading fluency, teachers need to provide activities and instruction to the students. To achieve this goal for reading, teachers can assist students by increasing practice through audiotapes and other technologies (NIFL, 2002), of which using ebooks or other technologies in a literature circle would be an excellent application.

## II. LITERATURE CIRCLE DESIGN AND BENEFITS

The literature circle is a cooperative learning reading activity for a group of four to six students at any grade level or subject area. Students interact in structured discussion and extended responses, while through a variety of activities, students are guided to a deeper understanding of their reading. In a role-based literature circle, each member of a circle is

assigned a specific role, with specific responsibilities, which are used to guide the group in a discussion of the text material they are all reading. Literature circles provide a way for students to engage in critical thinking and reflection as they read, discuss, and respond to books, articles, stories, or other reading material. The literature circle assignments or roles guide students to deeper understanding of what they read through structured discussion and extended written and artistic response as they share thoughts, concerns and their understanding of the concepts, events, and material presented in the material being read. Integrating technology can extend the literature circle by providing interactions beyond the classroom, along with resources for better understanding the literature and using the technology tools to assist students in accessing, organizing, analyzing, and communicating their approaches to essential questions (Lamb & Smith, 1999).

## 1 Role Sheet Rationale

Role sheets or job aids are a starting place for students to use for how to discuss a text being read. Each student in a group would have a different role, and that role's role sheet would provide specific instructions or descriptions for what that student is to do in preparation for the day's book discussion (see appendix for samples). Some teachers use role sheets with their students during a literature circle, but others find that the roles may take focus and energy away from the discussion. While many consider that the goal of a teacher is to move beyond the use of job aids or role sheets, others especially those new, either teachers or students, may prefer their use. An advantage of the role sheets is that the sheets themselves can be used for instructional and assessment purposes, providing physical documentation of student work and ability. Role sheets can also provide needed direction and assistance to students new to literary analysis or those that might otherwise find such a discussion a difficult activity.

## 2. Basic Literature Circle Model

- 1) Obtain 4-5 (or more) copies of a number of different books. Make sure that the books have some variation in reading level: easy, average, and challenging.
- 2) Set the books or book descriptions out for the students to review.
- 3) The students should now list their preferences for which book group they wish to join. The teacher then uses the student preferences and their understanding of the students' reading levels and choices to assign students into the groups.
- 4) Student groups can now meet and complete a KWL (Know-Want-Learned concept map) about the book. Students can also now make a response or reading journal in which to write their findings from each role and any other thoughts, ideas, or questions that they

develop while reading.

- 5) Students can read their books by themselves, with a partner, or in small groups. Readings can be set by chapter, or numbers of pages, it is usually better to have small daily goals rather than large weekly goals for student readings. One strategy that helps many is to have the group start by round-robin reading aloud for the first and maybe the second chapter, depending on length. The group can then practice their reading strategies and discuss developments, questions, ideas, and word meanings as they occur. After the initial meeting, the teacher or group leader can assign the next pages to read from homework. Teachers may wish to have students meet daily for a few minutes to check on each other readings and remind the students about what reading homework pages are to be read next.
- 6) As students read, they should somehow flag in their books important elements, questions, or discussion points with sticky notes (paper or digital) or write in response journals. Paper sticky notes can easily be transferred into reading journals.
- 7) During the full Literature Circle meeting, students will complete their roles and associated job aids or worksheets during the meeting time. For each meeting, students should have new role assignments. Students keep rotating roles until they finish their book.
- 8) When they have finished their literature circle book and discussion, students should complete some form of self or group evaluation.

### **3. Electronic Forms of Text**

Electronic books or ebooks are a highly accommodating form of reading materials that can be used in a literature circle. Currently, there are over five million ebooks in English available online for free (Internet Archive, n.d.). Reading is based on the technology of writing and printing, which has now evolved into a technological format. When reviewing reading history there is a recurrent trend of interest in the application of other technologies into reading (Kamil, Intrator, & Kim, 2000). Ebooks are textual documents that have been converted and “published” in an electronic format that display on ebook readers, devices or computers using ebook software programs. It has been found that availability of books may be a key factor in reading achievement. Countries scoring higher in reading have students with greater access to books (Elley, 1992). There is additional data that supports this need for book access by students, such as from Krashen (1995) found a positive correlation between reading comprehension scores and number of books per student in school libraries. Using computers with reading instruction has also been found to assist in facilitating reading comprehension, and increasing the students’ attitudes toward computer interactions (Kamil, 2003).

### 1) Ebook Libraries

There are a number of free online ebook libraries and other resources which can be used to obtain ebooks for classes. Some of the largest include International Children's Digital Library (<http://www.icdlbooks.org/>), with an international collection that reflects both the diversity and quality of children's literature, Project Gutenberg (<https://www.gutenberg.org/>), the oldest and one of the largest online libraries with online branches in many countries, and many more such as The Internet Public Library (<http://www.ipl.org/div/books>), the Online Book Page (<http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/>), and the World Library (<http://www.worldlibrary.org/home>). Many of these books are not just available as digital print, but also are available in audio formats, such as books from Project Gutenberg (person and machine read) and Loyal Books (<http://www.loyalbooks.com/>), both sites have free audio books that can be downloaded or played online. For a more comprehensive list of available libraries visit [www.drscavanaugh.org/ebooks/](http://www.drscavanaugh.org/ebooks/).

### III. Technology Enhanced Literature Circle Roles

Literature circles are a strategy that students can use to share their reading experiences, and at the same time integrate technology. Using a technology-enhanced literature circle allows readers to still experience standard literature circle concepts and strategies with value added by technology integrations that require the students to use technology tools as they apply to today's literacies. Technology-based activity roles include digital technology applications of search and research, multimedia, and using technology for the organization. (see Table 1 and the appendix at the end of the paper).

**TABLE 1**

**The Technology-Enhanced Literature Circle Roles and Technology Associated Applications**

Technology Application Area	Role	Technology Application
Search & Research	Vocabulary Elaborator	Interactive dictionary Online dictionaries
	Background Researcher	Internet research Search engines
	Web Researcher	Ask an expert Author study/ask an author

Multimedia	Literary Expository	Audio recording
	Graphic Illustrator	Paint
	Media Hunter	Multimedia search engines
Organization	Graphic Organizer	Concept mapping software
		Concept map websites
	Mapper/Tracker	Online research
		Desktop publishing

These technology enhancements for literature circle roles use technology tools that are available on a standard classroom computer with Internet access or even a student's own smartphone. Some of the specific job assignments related to searching and research have the students use a variety of web applications, including different kinds of search engines and going to specific websites, such as online encyclopedia and atlas sites, to do research. Multimedia role assignments have the students using multimedia applications to create drawings using digital paint or drawing tools, make an audio recording of themselves reading passages, and manipulate images using desktop publishing. Organizing activities include having the students use either concept mapping software programs or use websites which can help students organize information.

## 1. Effective Collaborative Learning

Literature circles use cooperative learning as a basic strategy. This type of learning is also authentic as in most situations work teams have replaced the independent worker. Some of the elements of effective collaborative learning include:

- Positive interdependence
- Individual and group accountability
- Interpersonal and small group skills
- Face-to-face promotive interaction
- Group processing (IT Learning & Development, 2017, p. 4)

Successful cooperative learning takes effort by each group member. For a group to be effective, each of the individual group members needs to have clear goals, plans, and roles, as well as the ability to work together, with individual and mutual accountability. The use of the role sheets adds that level of individual accountability while still working with group accountability during the discussions.

## IV. CONCLUSION

From my own experiences and the experiences of many other instructors, literature circles can be an effective strategy for students to learn many of the ways to analyze and discuss literature, become more literate with text and media and information technology. Literature circles provide opportunities for students to engage in critical thinking and reflection as they read, discuss, and respond to the text. Students can use the strategy to add to their understanding as they construct meaning with other readers in their group. The benefits of literature circles include:

1. Help to teach, not merely check, comprehension
2. Allow you to teach many facets of comprehension
3. Encourage students to learn from one another
4. Motivate students naturally
5. Promote discussion more effectively than whole groups (Day, Spiegel, McLellan, & Brwon, 2002)

The literature circle assignments or roles begin the process to guide students to deeper understanding of what they read through structured discussion and extended written and artistic response. At the same time, a literature circle can provide a constructive educational opportunity for students to control their own learning as they share thoughts, concerns and their understanding of the concepts, events, and material presented in the material being read as they respond and create.

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## APPENDIX

### Technology Enhanced Literature Circle Roles

(more activities available from

[http://drscavanaugh.org/lit\\_cir/technology\\_integrated\\_activities.htm](http://drscavanaugh.org/lit_cir/technology_integrated_activities.htm))

**Vocabulary Elaborator**<sup>(tech)</sup>

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Group: \_\_\_\_\_

Book: \_\_\_\_\_

Author: \_\_\_\_\_

Reading Assignment: page \_\_\_\_\_ to page \_\_\_\_\_

**Assignment:**

Your job is to develop a list of words for your group to define in the context of this book, or part of the book. Your task is to help define these words from the reading and share with the other. The words you should select to define should be words that you or other members of your group cannot pronounce, define, or understand in the way it is presented. To find your words:

1. First, point to the unexplained word and then underline or highlight it.
2. Next, read the sentence containing the unexplained word.
  - a. If you cannot comprehend the meaning of the word, read the preceding sentence to try to figure out the definition.
  - b. If you still don't have a definition for the marked word, then read the next sentence after the marked word.
3. Lastly, use a dictionary to check the definition of the word. Use either an interactive dictionary that occurs when you highlight the word or visit an online dictionary site such as:
  - The Internet Picture Dictionary  
<http://www.pdictionary.com/>
  - The Online Rhyming Dictionary  
<http://www.writeexpress.com/online2.html>
  - Commonly-Used American Slang  
<http://www.manythings.org/slang/>
  - Dictionary.com:<http://www.dictionary.com/> /

Usually, dictionaries will have several meanings and it is important to look at each numbered definition and decide which one coincides with the marked word.

Words I have never heard before:

Words I don't know what they mean:

Words I have seen before, but never used this way:

Word	Page/Paragraph/Line	Definition
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		

### Literary Expository<sup>(tech)</sup>

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Group: \_\_\_\_\_

Book: \_\_\_\_\_

Author: \_\_\_\_\_

Reading Assignment: page \_\_\_\_\_ to page \_\_\_\_\_

#### Assignment:

Your job as the literary expository is to select from the book or passage, by yourself or with help, several favorite or interesting passages. Your task is to select three or four of your favorite parts of the story to share aloud with your group members. As you read and find sections that you like, highlight the paragraphs and record the corresponding page numbers you enjoyed reading and want to hear read-aloud. Possible reasons for selection include: important, well-written, humorous, informative, surprising, controversial, funny, confusing, and/or thought-provoking. Once you have selected your sentences use a microphone and software to record your sentences into a computer and then play them back when having your discussion with the other. During the playing of the "read aloud" segment, the other group members will play and listen intently to your recordings as they read along with the sections and determine and then share what particular aspect of the reading they enjoyed the most. After the book or section has been read in its entirety by the group, the reading

clips can all be played or “read aloud” for review and to select which was the best overall. You must find at least three, but no more than five sentences, to “read-aloud” to your group.

Page/Paragraph/Line	Reason	Sentence
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		

### Graphic Illustrator<sup>(tech)</sup>

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Group: \_\_\_\_\_

Book: \_\_\_\_\_

Author: \_\_\_\_\_

Reading Assignment: page \_\_\_\_\_ to page \_\_\_\_\_

#### Assignment:

Your job as the graphic illustrator is to draw two pictures using a paint or other drawing program on the computer that depicts the main idea and feeling in that narrative. Your task is to create illustrations that show a character's' interaction with other characters or story elements. Use a drawing tool to create your picture and add text labels to the parts to assist everyone with understanding your drawings. Additionally, after creating your pictures that show story/text ideas, you will then discuss your idea pictures with your group. You might want to print out a copy of your picture to share with your group. Once your pictures are finished being drawn, add to your picture by creating a text box and write out a description of the characters' interaction in complete sentences and standard paragraph form. Use the space below to develop your paragraph drafts.

Some possible online drawing tool suggestions:



diagram; timeline; or concept web. Print your concept to share with the other group members and see if they have any other points or connections to add. You can make any type of graphic organizer you wish, or choose from the options available from each of the sites in the list below.

- International Reading Association's Read•Write•Think:  
[http://www.readwritethink.org/student\\_mat/index.asp](http://www.readwritethink.org/student_mat/index.asp)
- Teach-nology web site:  
[http://www.teach-nology.com/web\\_tools/graphic\\_org/](http://www.teach-nology.com/web_tools/graphic_org/)

*Here are a few free concept mapping creation sites/software that you might want to use.*

- bubbl.us: <http://www.bubbl.us/>
- CMap: <http://cmap.ihmc.us/>
- Coggle: <https://coggle.it/>
- Gliffy: <http://www.gliffy.com>
- Mind42: <https://mind42.com/>
- Mindmeister: <http://www.mindmeister.com/>
- Mindomo: <http://www.mindomo.com/index.php>
- Text 2 Mind Map: <http://www.text2mindmap.com/>

Character Map | Timeline | Character Interaction | Story Line/Plot | Compare & Contrast (Venn)

Applicable level: Middle School, High School, College

Keywords: literature circle, analysis, role sheets, literacy, collaborative, cooperative, activity

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Topics and contents should be related to a theory of teaching English and its acquisition and practice in the classroom through using visual media such as movies, TV dramas, and games, various multimedia such as web-based contents, mobile apps, and educational appliances, graphic novels and comics. Any article from adjacent studies such as linguistics or literature should contain the educational and pedagogical implications for language learning and teaching through the media mentioned above.

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