

Using Instructional Technology to Improve Literature Circles Discussion

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Abstract

This article explores instructional technology that enables intermediate level participants in literature circles discussion groups to review and reflect on their activity so that they might move from teacher prompts and turntaking to more independent discussion. Literature circles are small heterogeneous discussion groups focused on a common text. Students read material, prepare for discussion by considering information in a particular way, and join a group to exchange information and ideas. Independent questioning behavior, sharing, and dialogue should follow. Deeper comprehension of text and development of interpersonal skills are the hoped for outcomes. Discussion can be enhanced and improved when participants are able to reflect on previous dialogues. Teachers can enable reflection by using instructional technology to record conversations and by identifying patterns or elements that could improve discussion. Review and reflection of previous discussions has led students to develop higher level questions, to demonstrate deeper comprehension, and to work to enhance group dynamics. While there exists some research describing intermediate level student reflection to improve literature circles, more is needed to improve data. Online options improve discussion as well but that is for another paper.

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This educator has used small group conversation in library class for intermediate grade level students to help them to increase reading comprehension, experience a joy of reading, develop listening skills, and practice conversation skills. Discussion groups in the classroom fit into a social constructivist view, where the student/learners are participants “in a sociocultural process of learning,” described by Bransford and Schwartz (as cited by Reiser & Dempsey, 2012, p. 58). Students take on a “cognitive apprenticeship” (Reiser & Dempsey, 2012, p. 59) as they move through a process of reading, preparation for discussion, and dialogue. They work to construct new knowledge by interacting with text and exhibiting empathetic skills that enliven the classroom community among them (Bryant & Bates, 2015, p. 17). Students grow to appreciate that what they do and say affects the success of the group. They move to independently talk about a mutually shared text in ways that welcome the exchange.

But there is agreement among educators that “literature circles are fragile curricular structures that can easily lose their impact when students are not invested” (Mills & Jennings, 2011, p. 591). When multiple students want to share at the same time, or when students have add-ons to thoughts that divert from the original discussion, there may be interruptions and changes of direction in the conversation. Running short of class time may interfere with the discussion as well. Open disagreements may surface that students are not able to appropriately handle. Face to face discussion has its drawbacks.

Vygotsky (as cited in Gindi, 1999, p. 334) agrees that children can learn necessary social skills to interact and converse, but guidance from someone (like a teacher) and presence of other children with more experience in discussion can better move the group to success. And when students are able to observe and reflect about their discussion, they may be able improve participation in later conversations (Mills & Jennings, 2011, p. 591).

This article will focus on instructional technology that can be used to improve classroom discussion. Of special interest to this educator are opportunities for students to revisit their own discussions through written transcript, audiotape or videotape and to be able to reflect on the nature of the group activity. If discussion can allow for free flow of ideas, for disagreement and for understanding of differences, then reading comprehension will increase and a peaceable classroom community can be negotiated. One type of classroom discussion, literature circles (Daniels, 2002), encourages student independence in small group discussion about a text. The constraints that keep the discussion from achieving educators' intents have been addressed. Technology choices which may be used to directly or indirectly improve discussion will be reviewed. Advantages of online literature circles will be visited. The article will end with a call for more research which observes intermediate level students' reflections toward improvement (research studies tend to study the teachers who may teach the *method* of literature circles).

Literature circles

The literature circle is discussion that takes a collaborative reasoning approach, where students share responsibility for the group discussion - including independent questioning and turntaking - to best comprehend a text (Chinn, Richards, & Waggoner, 2001, p. 378). The group works best with a heterogeneous group (Daniels, 2002). Sanacore (2013) writes that literature circles provide a vehicle for nurturing personal and critical responses to text (p. 117). Peer discussions not only encourage deeper understanding of the text but also invite opportunities for building a classroom community through conversation. The teacher guides students to work toward independence in the discussion group; students learn to find courteous language, ask open-ended questions, and listen to and respond thoughtfully. The resulting opportunities for discussion "make possible the establishment of relations of negotiation, cooperation, mutual tolerance, the pursuit of common interests ... and the nonviolent resolution of conflicts" (Burbules, 1993, p. 13).

In one bilingual fourth grade classroom, students engaged in literature circle roles. The teacher modeled roles and made available multiple copies of texts of interest to each. Students selected a text and joined small groups with the same title (in English or Spanish). Each read a book and completed the assigned role sheet before engaging in discussion. Of particular interest to the researcher was the role of discussion director/questioner whose questions would ultimately influence the quality of discussion (Peralta, 2013, pp. 52-53).

Instructional Technology in the classroom

Using the constructivist approach which equates learning with creating meaning from experience (BlueSofaMedia, 2012), some researchers have sought to record the students in their discussion groups to enable reflection by the group. Then students used collaborative thinking skills to reflect and improve discussion. Using video and audio technology to record student discussion begins as a non-instructional mode of instructional technology. But when a teacher or researcher transcribes, assigns importance to elements to look for, and codes the transcript, then instructional technology becomes a method of research toward facilitating the learning process. (Coding is a way of determining particular aspects that the educator would like to see and noting how often they are present in the transcript). Final sharing of results with the teacher provides a device to deliver instruction. Reiser and Dempsey (2012) describe the progression of instructional technology in the classroom in components of mode, method, and media.

Audio and Video recording

Recording technology, combined with other data tools can allow for a more detailed and in depth analysis of the complex and multimodal interactions that take place in classrooms. (Otrell-Cass, Cowie, & Maguire, 2010, p. 116).

In the aforementioned bilingual fourth grade classroom, researcher/educator Claudia Peralta (2013) observed, video-taped, or audio-taped literature circles discussions and developed transcripts of conversations. When reviewing, the researcher focused on the role of the

discussion director, coding for levels of questions. Those “high-divergent questions” (p. 54) would encourage wonderful responses that tap into a group participant’s experiences and personal narrative. Such answers show courage to think about and to share information with the group (p. 60). In their earlier discussions, students were concerned about following teacher guidelines closely; many of their questions were text-to-text. But as teachers and students reflected on discussion content, students recognized that they could act more independently. As they became more confident, the number of open-ended questions increased.

Another fourth grade class was observed by researchers Chinn, Anderson, and Waggoner (2001). They used descriptive transcripts (observed or audiotaped recordings which included talk overs and intonation descriptors) and coded for taking turns, questions by teacher or students, and cognitive processes (types of answers). After reviewing data, the teacher adjusted instruction (prior to students meeting in discussion groups) to allow students more control of turntaking and to enable the group to control the topic (p.384).

Clarke & Holwadel (2007) recorded literature circles discussions in the Holwadel’s intermediate grade classroom. Students were able to view and reflect on early group dynamics and make improvements to their listening and speaking behaviors in discussions (p.25).

In a fifth grade classroom in Richland School District Two in South Carolina, the teacher allowed time for students to review their audiotapes of discussion and to reflect. This led to students taking the responsibility for their own improvement. They worked to self-monitor so everyone got to take a turn, or to say what they needed to say. Mills and Jennings (2011) wrote about the reflective strategy, “They learned to study themselves to outgrow themselves individually and collectively” (p. 592).

Online discussion groups and transcripts

Research shows a high level of quality participation when students take their discussions online. The use of asynchronous virtual discussions improves the level of conversation. Digital

tools can enable students to respond to each post, ask for clarification, and take ideas a bit further than in a face to face discussion (Coffey, 2012, p. 400). Time can be given to writing posts that demonstrate higher level thinking. Time constraints are less of an issue, no one is interrupting another, and other digital tools can be used to reference, recall, and elaborate (Cavanaugh, 2006, p. 83). Online discussion increases accessibility for the diverse learner (Bowers-Campbell, 2011, p. 566), reticent speaker, or physically disabled participant. Frequent teacher feedback helps to encourage the best student participation in online work (Bryant & Bates, 2015, pp. 20-21). And written posts can be revisited, reflected upon, and rewritten.

Teacher professional development

University classes and professional development opportunities enable teachers to understand and appreciate student-led conversations as a method for comprehension and community building. By using recording technology, digital tools, or online resources, teachers gain additional strategies for improving discussion and enriching comprehension (Bromley, et al., 2014). In many cases, coding is mentioned as a way to clearly present data results (Bowers-Campbell 2011; Kucan, 2009). In order to help students reflect after listening to or viewing one of the discussions, it is helpful for the teacher to have previously reviewed the recorded event in order to talk to students about what to look for. In observations with teachers viewing video, researchers van Es, Tunney, Goldsmith, & Seago (2014) listed some ways to get the best results after viewing a video, including posing general prompts, highlighting, and clarifying (p. 346). These are all ways to direct and extend thinking that could be used successfully with intermediate level students.

Conclusion and Further Study

Wertsch and Toma (1997) wrote that students need to “engage in discourse grounded in the dialogic function of text” (p. 173) and actively engage with others in thinking and discussion.

Rintoul & Wolfe (2015) write about literature circles in the context of Universal Design for Learning (UDL); the activity creates accessibility to social and academic life.

Mills and Jennings (2011) have described fifth grade students who engaged in “reflective conversations” to improve their literature circles discussions (p. 590). The value of this activity was a chance to deepen their comprehension of content and to make “wise, intentional decisions that led to growth and change, individually and collectively” (p. 591). At the end of the process, students were able to observe how the discussion might go off track and how a member of the group could “step into a leadership role” to bring the discussion back to topic (p. 596). With guidance from the teacher this self-reflection became both “compassionate” and “thoughtful” (p. 596).

There is much research toward improvement of the classroom dialogue, socratic circle, literature circles, or grand conversation. More research needs to take place to increase data about successful strategies for intermediate level students in literature circles groups. In order to improve discussion teachers may need to design supportive instructional strategies (Reiser & Dempsey, 2012, p. 311) and consider reflective methods. Using instructional technology to record, transcribe, code and reflect upon discussion events can have multiple benefits. These efforts will bring about higher level thinking skills, empathy, and understanding of diversity. The classroom is a small community which needs to exist peacefully so that students may learn; this may mean that issues that make it difficult to learn may be resolved intelligently and safely while talking about reading in a literature circles discussion group.

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