

Using Literature Circles to Provide Support for Online Discussions

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INTRODUCTION

Engaging students in virtual discussions about reading materials for a course or workshop can be challenging, especially when content is dense and difficult to comprehend. However, as

noted in previous *Ends and Means* columns, successful online discussions usually occur when expectations are fully outlined (Milman, 2008) and good questions are crafted (Milman, 2009a) to foster thoughtful discussion. Other approaches can also be



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applied to promote meaningful discussions in online environments, as well as to differentiate instruction (Milman, 2009b). One such strategy is the “literature circle,” a strategy originally developed for use with elementary students but increasingly applied in K-12 and higher education settings. This article shares what literature circles are and how this strategy can be applied in online environments.

WHAT ARE LITERATURE CIRCLES?

Literature circles (Daniels, 1994; Daniels & Steineke, 2004) are small, temporary discussion groups comprised of learners who have read the same piece of literature but who have different roles and responsibilities. In literature circles, instructors plan and facilitate the learning structure, including student roles, whereas learners share perceptions, interpretations, and questions about the literature they have read. Learners in a literature circle read the same material, but each group member has a different role and responsibility to communicate their learning about the material. When learners have completed the tasks associated with their roles, they meet to share their insights with their group members.

There are many different roles that learners might have in a literature circle. Some examples are:

- **Discussion Facilitator:** This individual crafts the questions for discussion about the reading and facilitates the discussion.
- **Connector:** The connector’s role is to identify similarities, differences, and relationships of the reading to other readings and/or experiences within the course or workshop.
- **Illustrator:** This person presents the material using some type of graphic organizer (e.g., Venn diagram) or drawing.

- **Vocabulary Expert:** This individual’s role is to develop a list of important new vocabulary words and definitions found in the reading.
- **Summarizer:** This person summarizes the material and the discussion.

Each role enables learners to examine the reading material (e.g., text chapter, article) from a different perspective or set of “lenses” and comes with an associated task to complete. Although these roles are commonly used in literature circles, instructors have the freedom to develop other roles based on learner and course needs, as well as to assign more than one student to a role (e.g., there could be two discussion facilitators in a group).

Learners and instructors benefit from literature circles in numerous ways. During literature circles, learners work together to share their insights with one another. They increase their comprehension of readings while also building collaborative skills. From working together doing interdependent activities, learners can also develop a community around authentic and meaningful work. Peer accountability not only encourages learners to do their work, but often improves its quality.

HOW CAN LITERATURE CIRCLES BE USED IN ONLINE COURSES?

Although literature circles are effective in traditional learning environments, the strategy can also be implemented well in online learning environments. Just as many online courses incorporate discussion boards, these can also be utilized for sharing and presenting the work done by different group members. For example, the vocabulary expert might share a list of words and definitions as a file attachment to an online posting. The graphic organizer might create and share a flowchart of a process introduced in the reading material and post it as an attachment along with an

explanation to the discussion forum (the flowchart might also serve as a study guide, too). Learners performing this role might use a graphic organizer software program (e.g., Visio) or draw it with pencil and paper and then scan it before uploading the file to the discussion. The discussion leader might post discussion questions in the forum and encourage the other literature circle members to respond just as they would in an online discussion by posting probing questions as group members respond to the initial questions. The following outlines some steps instructors should take to ensure success of a literature circle:

- Incorporate literature circles as part of a course or workshop through assignments and grading;
- Select and assign the literature to be read (Note: different groups can read different materials);
- Determine the time frame for the literature circle (e.g., 1 week);
- Develop and explain the various roles for learners in literature circles;
- Determine how students will be divided into groups (assigned or students choose);
- Facilitate group work;
- Confer with learners or groups who struggle;
- Establish and share the assessment of the literature circle tasks and/or participation;
- Participate in the discussion and/or literature circle where/when needed; and
- Ask learners to perform roles using the online discussion board or forum to participate in the literature circle.

The literature circle strategy is robust and supports some variation in its implementation. In an online environment, it probably should not be used for all readings—rather, the strategy should be used to differentiate instruction when readings are challenging, important, or learners require additional support. Initially, literature circles may be teacher-led, but learners who are truly engaged in the literature selection can conduct their own sessions. Literature circles generally have regular meetings, with discussion roles rotating each session. Once readers can successfully conduct their own wide-ranging, self-sustaining discussions, formal discussion roles may be dropped. Personal responses, insights, and questions can be recorded in logs or journals during reading, then shared during group sessions.

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