

Online Book Clubs as Literature Circles

Article

Literature circles have traditionally been effective as a transitional learning tool for highlighting the many “hats” or roles one must wear when reading a book (connector, summarizer, vocabulary builder, literary illuminator, etc.). However, a competent reader must learn to independently think through many, if not all, of the roles of a traditional literature circle while reading. The competent reader must visualize story action, make note of story elements (setting, characters, plot, conflict, etc.), summarize, explore new vocabulary, sequence events, ask questions, and make connections.

ONLINE OPTION

A good learning tool that will bring all these complex processes together for students can be found in online book clubs. They offer a more flexible way for students to get together and discuss their book through the online component of blogs. This helps move book clubs from simply effective to powerful, engaging tools for learning.

Online book clubs are not simply literature circles without roles. They also are not designed for whole class book studies, nor are they necessarily leveled reading groups. Instead they offer an opportunity for authentic dialogue around a common theme. When used in conjunction with a blog, book clubs can:

►Support productive communication

Each week’s blog post can help to focus the student’s attention on a specific question related to his/her book or a general question that guides student responses. This sets up a wonderful way to jigsaw readers from various book club groups into new discussion groups to share similarities and differences between themes, characters, settings, and plots (i.e., Venn Diagrams).

►Model digital citizenship expectations

When students are allowed to participate in meaningful online discussions, the digital world is opened to them with all of its challenges and opportunities. Online book clubs are combined with direct instruction as well as modeling of digital citizenship expectations like respect, etiquette, and online safety. These clubs are powerful and safe platforms for students to practice valuable 21st-century skills.

►Allow for 24/7 participation

There is no need to wait to share ideas. Based on the comment time stamps available, many students choose to jump on the blog right after school, during school, or at times that they may have otherwise chosen to watch television or play video games at home.

►Craftsmanship and authentic audience

Students like to see their work online. They love to see that others have responded to their comments and that their contribution made a difference to the groups overall discussion. When family members and the community can also view their responses and post their thoughts, it provides students with a bigger audience. As a result, students begin to understand the value of craftsmanship and editing when creating responses.

READY TO GET STARTED? HERE IS WHAT YOU NEED

►A BLOG

If you don’t yet have one for your class, there are many free, full-featured options available (Edublogs.com, wordpress.com, blogger.com, posterous.com). Many district IT departments already support a blog platform for the district, so be sure to check with IT support first. Be sure to check out the numerous How-To videos available on Vimeo and YouTube to help get you started with whichever blogging service you choose.

►SELECT POTENTIAL TITLES WITH A RANGE OF APPROPRIATE LEXILE LEVELS FOR YOUR STUDENTS.

Will there be a thematic link for all of your titles (historic events and time periods, immigration, fantasy, overcoming adversity, etc.)? Provide booktalks (<http://www.multcolib.org/talk/guides.html>), book trailers, and student previewing for each title. Students can then prioritize their book preferences and turn in their choices to the teacher. This allows the teacher to create cohesive book club groups while ensuring that each child has a choice and a good opportunity for success with their chosen book club.

►CREATE A CATEGORY OR TAG FOR EACH BOOK TITLE.

Be sure to add the categories or tags to your main menu to allow quick navigation for your students and online visitors.

►CREATE A GENERAL DISCUSSION TOPIC FOR THE BOOKS.

A general discussion topic helps when working on story elements or common themes between books. At the end of the week, consider “jigsawing” groups to create new groups for a face-to-face discussion of the similarities and differences between the main characters, conflict, settings, plot, etc. of each book.

►TRAIN STUDENTS.

Consider an introductory post to help students learn how to login and participate in comments and responses on a post. Different blog services have different methods of creating participants, so make sure you are well versed in the process or find a tech-savvy student and have them teach the class.

►ENLIST THE PARENT COMMUNITY.

Many parents would love to be involved with book clubs if they only had the time to make it to class for the meetings. Now parents can be a part of a book club group without ever having to come to school during the workday. Consider a brief meeting, handout, or tutorial for interested parents so they know your expectations, what a model response might look like, and how to help elicit more specific responses from students in their group (See resources for parents at: http://blogs.wilps.wlww.k12.or.us/library/?page_id=803).

GIVE IT A TRY

Online Book Clubs offer a genuine opportunity to engage students, increase the depth of student responses, track progress over time, and have online examples to include in student portfolios. It is also a really interesting way to see how a different medium of discussion can create new leaders and active participants who may not show themselves through in-class discussions. Give it a try. Share your experiences with your colleagues and get ready to use the power of blogs to help you build and enhance great teaching and learning.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

For even more in-depth use of the blog for book clubs, consider some of the following to enhance the experience:

- Links to information related to the content of the book. For example, *Iron Thunder* by Avi is a great opportunity to link to resources and primary source documents about the U.S. War Between the States.
- Link to interviews with the author, professional reviews, and even your library catalog or Amazon.com to encourage students to publish their own book reviews and ratings.
- Often authors or publishers will have value-added features on their websites that allow the reader to become more involved with the book, author, and writing process.

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