

(Almost) Paperless Literature Circles

As a result of literature circles being integrated into my fourth-grade class' weekly routines, students independently read books of *their* choosing on a regular basis, and any collaboration they had regarding these books was mostly facilitated by *them*.

Here's a glimpse into my fourth-grade classroom, and one way to run (almost) paperless literature circles.

Background

I divided my 29 students into six groups, and the students were allowed to decide with whom they worked. Throughout the year, each group read chapter books of their choosing, one after the other. All of the paperless work was completed in [Schoology](#), our learning management system (LMS).

The students met for literature circles twice a week -- Mondays and Fridays -- for about 40 minutes per session. Here's what happened on each of those days.

Mondays

All six groups met, with four in the classroom and two in the hallway. After the groups came together, students confirmed their jobs for the week, which had to be completed by Friday. There were eight job descriptions:

- **Connector:** Go into detail regarding a specific text-to-self or text-to-text connection.
- **Passage Picker:** Find one or two paragraphs that are moving in some way. Write why you picked each passage and describe your thoughts.
- **Plot Twister:** What exactly would you change in the chapters that you read for homework to make them go the way that you would have preferred? Why?
- **Wonderer:** As you read, create a list of relevant statements starting with "What if?" or "I wonder."
- **Predictor:** Based on what you read for homework, explain what you think is going to happen next. Also explain why you made your predictions.
- **Psychologist:** Give advice to one of the book's characters. What would you tell him or her to do, and why?
- **Journalist:** Pick a character and, based on what you read for homework, write a passage in his or her personal journal.
- **Student Choice:** Decide how you would like to respond to the chapters that you

read for homework. If you aren't satisfied with any of the jobs, create your own idea.

Here are the directions that accompanied every job:

1. Your homework (at least 6-8 sentences) should be posted to your Literature Circle group as a new discussion.
2. Name the discussion "Job title, pages." (e.g. Connector, 1-52)
3. For extra credit, attach a completed Role Sheet to your discussion. (The Role Sheets were from [Literature Circle Role Sheets for Fiction and Nonfiction Books](#) and [Literature Circles: The Way to Go and How to Get There.](#))
4. Quality comment on the discussions of others. Post your discussion early to leave time for others to comment.

After the students confirmed their jobs, they started their reading for the week, which consisted of about 40 pages from their book. They read with each other's jobs in mind, as they were encouraged to continually pause, discuss the book through the lens of their individual tasks, and take notes on what they learned from classmates.

Fridays

Students met to discuss the week's reading through their Schoology discussion forum posts (and optionally the role sheets). However, on a weekly basis, before everyone separated into groups, we investigated as a class how their posts could be used as conversation starters, but not as the conversation itself. As [Stephanie Harvey and Harvey Daniels](#) explain, when used improperly "these role sheets quickly become mechanical, hindering rather than empowering lively, spontaneous book talk" (p. 248).

To promote in-depth conversation, we were constantly coming up with sentence starters that would assist in uncovering a deeper understanding of what was read through rich inquiry and debate. (As a starting point, we called upon [prompts](#) from [Integrating Differentiated Instruction and Understanding by Design](#) and [Embedded Formative Assessment](#).) In the end, the goal was for students to collaborate through the use of their own "thick" questions and without assistance from the teacher, outside resources, jobs, or role sheets.

During both the Monday and Friday sessions, I simply traveled from group to group, helping them to stay on task and facilitate conversation. As the school year progressed, the majority of the groups no longer needed my assistance.

During each Friday session I let all of the groups know when five minutes remained. At

that point, the students individually completed and handed in either the Individual Rating Report (adapted from the *Literature Circles* book) or the Progress-Process Person form (adapted from the *Literature Circle Role Sheets* book). We alternated which handout was used on a weekly basis.

On the Individual Rating Report, students graded themselves on a scale for such statements as:

- I was responsible and brought my book to class.
- I encouraged others to share group work.
- I shared group time by building on the ideas of others.

There were also a few open-ended questions involving what was learned, what questions existed, and what could be improved upon for next time.

On the Progress-Process Person form, students rated all of their group members on a scale regarding whether or not they were prepared, how much they contributed while also encouraging others to contribute, and if they remained focused.

In the End

My process represents one of countless ways to facilitate literature circles, so feel free to take it, argue with it, or adapt it to fit your students' needs.

If I were to return to the classroom and revise this process, it would be interesting to do away with the jobs and role sheets altogether and have the students "take full responsibility for capturing their during-reading responses using Post-its, text annotations, bookmarks, and journals" ([Harvey & Daniels, 2015](#)).

How do you or could you run literature circles in your classroom? Could literature circles work across all content areas, and not just language arts?