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RUNNING HEAD: LITERATURE CIRCLES IN A SECONDARY LANGUAGE ARTS
CLASSROOM

Using Literature Circles to Improve Critical Thinking Skills
In The Secondary Classroom

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Using Literature Circles to Improve Critical Thinking Skills In The Secondary Classroom

Problem Statement & Its Significance

Ideally, education should be about growing, being challenged and looking deeper within oneself while at the same time looking further outward. This notion still holds true. But the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), along with a world recession in the fall of 2008 and its continual slide through 2010, has proved that we are not just educated Americans competing for resources with other Americans, but we are now global citizens in competition for jobs and resources. This has placed an increased emphasis on the importance of education and has highlighted the frightening gap in the American educational system of where we are and where we need to be.

The emergence of the global economy, and thus, global competition has provided education with a new set of challenges. Education must evolve and adapt with the ever-changing times in order to remain relevant and properly provide a true education for future generations. The skills that our grandparents needed were not the same set of skills our parents needed. Likewise, the skills of our parents' generation will no longer be the same skills our generation will need in order to succeed. As our society is forced to adapt to these circumstances, so is our educational system. A presentation by Karl Fisch (2006) highlights this current state of American education:

According to Richard Riley, former Secretary of Education, The top ten jobs that will be in demand in 2010 didn't exist in 2004 [...] We are currently preparing students for jobs that don't yet exist, using technologies that haven't yet been invented, in order to solve problems that we don't even know are problems yet.

As technology thrusts us into a new educational frontier, as educators, we must rise with these demands in order to meet this challenge. There has been much

discussion on where education needs to go or how it needs to adapt. Many politicians, like Ohio Gov. Ted Strickland, have leapt onto the Partnership for 21st Century Skills' (www.21stcenturyskills.org) bandwagon. The Partnership believes that the high school curriculum should move past the core content classes and should serve to promote students who are critical thinkers, good communicators, technologically savvy and collaborative problem solvers. However, this is not a new sentiment. In fact, the 1996 National Education Summit introduced 44 U.S. governors and 50 corporate CEOs into the national curriculum conversation. According to Bierbauer's (1996) article, these leaders expressed that they were "fed-up with the passive acceptance of mediocrity" and believed that there needed to be a higher standard for academic success. This rising concern, which started with President Reagan's *Nation at Risk* (1983), was the catalyst for the eventual passing of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (2001). Though NCLB presented a much-needed element of accountability and standardization for education, it has also helped to highlight the loopholes that still remain. Linda Hammond-Darling's (2007) criticisms of NCLB suggest that although NCLB was a good idea, its implementation has proved troublesome. The outcomes-based approach has placed the focus on testing rather than teaching and learning. In addition, Hammond-Darling believes NCLB has established a very "narrow definition of learning," by only focusing on math, science and reading.

Though teachers and students must be held accountable, our educational system and curriculum must extend its reach past the core subjects and build the skills that will help students become more successful. In the English classroom the ability to read, write and analyze are the key skills on which the language arts curriculum focuses. However, these skills must be challenged and developed, not simply tested to see if a student can do it or not. What good is being able to write, if one has nothing to say? What good is being able to read, if one cannot question and analyze what they are reading? What good is being able to analyze and understand if one cannot take that knowledge and apply it to different contexts in order to solve other future problems? The measure of education must go further than just written

tests. It should be measured by the ability to apply knowledge and skills, not simply to prove their existence.

Though this call for reform might make logical sense, the numbers prove that our educational system, and specifically our language arts education, is going in the wrong direction even with the implementation of NCLB. The National Assessment of Educational Progress's (2005) report suggests that although the number of students enrolled in four years of high school English has continued to increase since 1992, and although today's students spend more time per week studying, only 40 percent of 2005 high school 12th graders read at an appropriate reading comprehension level. In fact, this downward trend, according to The National Endowment of the Arts' (2007) report, has remained stable among all grade levels, even among college students and post-graduate adults.

For teachers, these numbers and trends are especially alarming and a source of motivation within one's own classroom. Teachers cannot continue to do the same things in their classroom and expect different results. If we are serious about reversing this trend and improving the comprehension and critical thinking skills of our students, we must alter our methodology.

There are many different reading comprehension strategies out there, but the one that has been most recommended for my classroom are literature circles. Literature circles are a student-centered, student-led approach to reading comprehension, discussing literature; critical thinking and they provide an opportunity for the application of knowledge. According to the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, being able to critical think and problem solve are the skills that need to be developed in order to reverse the ugly trend in American language arts education. While the push for standards and accountability are important, it is only the beginning not the end goal. Students need to develop their ability to think critically and apply knowledge in different contexts in order to succeed in today's world. The extensive research on literature circles by experts such as Katherine Schlick Noe (2009), Harvey Daniels (2002) and Bonnie Campbell Hill (2009) suggests that not only are literature circles beneficial in helping to improve critical

thinking skills among students, but that they also help to put the fun back into reading by engaging students.

Research Question

Therefore, in order to measure how literature circles develop these skills in secondary language arts students, this action research project will focus on literature circles as a pedagogical tool that builds and measures critical thinking and comprehension skills within the context of a language arts classroom. Specifically, the research question is, does implementing literature circles in a secondary language arts classroom improve reading comprehension and critical thinking skills as compared to a teacher-centered classroom?

Literature Review

While literature circles are no longer a foreign concept in the classroom or in research literature, they are still a somewhat fairly new concept. Karen Smith is credited as a first introducing literature circles in the early 1980s (Daniels, 1994). Although literature circles resemble adult-led book clubs, in the American educational system they represent a different approach to reading comprehension and critical thinking compared to the teacher-centered secondary language arts classroom model.

As the National Capital Language Resource Center (NCLRC) (www.nclrc.org) describes, teacher-centered classrooms place the focus on the instructor as the giver of knowledge. In teacher-centered classrooms, “teachers talk and students listen.” In the teacher-centered classroom, the teacher decides the topics of conversation and the texts that will be covered. Wu & Huang’s (2007) research suggests a student-centered approach is more likely to make students feel engaged in their learning when compared to a teacher-centered approach.

In fact, research suggests that literature circles help to remove the teacher as the center of knowledge and places the students in charge of their own learning, not simply as individuals, but in a group work setting. According to Professor Katherine Schlick Noe (2006) (<http://www.litcircles.org>), “Literature circles highlight

discussion, student response, free choice and collaboration and provide a way for students to engage in critical thinking and reflection.” These are the very skills that the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (www.21stcenturyskills.org) believes students will need to develop in order to compete within a globally competitive marketplace. These are also the skills, according to NAEP’s (2005) study that have been steadily declining over the past 15 years.

In order to better understand how literature circles can help improve students’ abilities in reading comprehension, critical thinking and group work; teachers need to have a better understanding of how literature circles operate.

What Are Literature circles?

Literature circles are a pedagogical approach that combines the best practices of collaborative learning, scaffolding theory, reader-response criticism, independent reading, and student-centered learning (www.wikipedia.org). While literature circles may appear like book clubs from the outside, they are in fact much more structured and purposeful. Daniels (2002) outlines the following as the key features of literature circles:

1. Students form groups and choose a text on which to focus.
2. Each group within the class will focus on a different text
3. Groups meet on a regular, predictable schedule
4. Students use written or drawn notes to guide their reading and discussions.
5. Group discussion on the text is student-led
6. Conversations should arise naturally, and although the topic of conversation may veer off topic, it should always return to the text.
7. The teacher is not the instructor, but rather is supposed to observe, facilitate, and take place in discussion as a co-learner and as a group member.
8. Students select and are responsible for certain roles and jobs within the group dynamic.
9. The teacher should model how students should facilitate their group roles.
10. Evaluation should be done through teacher observations, student self-evaluation and varied extension projects.

11. New groups should form when students select new texts to discuss (p. 18).

In addition, according to Campbell Hill (2009), a series of mini-lessons should be given in order for the teacher to model to the students how to discuss literature and how to facilitate the different group roles. Daniels (2002) suggests that these group roles could consist of (attached in Appendix A):

- Discussion Facilitator
- Passage Picker
- Illustrator
- Connector
- Summarizer
- Vocabulary Enricher
- Travel Tracer
- Investigator
- Figurative Language Finder

Daniels (2002) further breaks down each student role. The Discussion Facilitator's job is to prepare questions that facilitate group discussion of the text. These questions should be open-ended and should serve to keep group discussion on the text progressing and on-topic.

The Passage Picker's role is to select a few key passages from the text that illuminate a greater understanding of character development, plot, symbolism, theme, etc. The Passage Picker should correctly copy these passages down, with correct citation, and submit them to the group to read aloud and spark further discussion.

The Illustrator should create a visual that is representative to a key element of the text. This visual should not simply be a review of what happens, but should work to illustrate a greater theme or symbol from the novel. Again, this should work to spark discussion on the text and further student understanding.

The Connector works to select certain passages from the novel and connect them to reality; this could be the student's own life or a more macro-view of reality. For example, the Connector may connect some passages to school, home,

community, pop culture, etc. These connections are important and help to lead into a discussion of how the text relates to the readers' lives on a larger scale.

The Summarizer's job is to start the discussion with a brief summary of that day's assigned reading and should encompass important plot-related events, as well as character development. This should set the background for the group discussion and should help make sure that everyone is on the same page.

The Vocabulary Enricher should pull out any vocabulary or important concepts from the assigned reading and should provide the group with definitions in order to enhance group understanding.

The Travel Tracer's function is to keep track of the major changes in time, location, settings, and character development. The Travel Tracer should explain their work (written or visual) to the group and should facilitate a discussion on why these changes occur and their significance.

The Investigator's function is to investigate and report to the group on any important and/or useful background information central to the book. This investigative work could be focused on the cultural, geographical, and/or historical background of the novel. This information does not have to be incredibly formal, but should serve to add an enriched context to the text and the group's understanding of the text.

The Figurative Language Finder should search out and identify the pertinent metaphors, personification, similes, etc. that serve to better illustrate the themes and events in the text. In addition to simply identifying these instances and relating them to the text, group discussions should critically analyze these literary devices to determine whether they work effectively in the text.

The Importance of Assessment in Literature circles

Although the individual group roles are important, literature circles must also consist of varied assessments and evaluations in order to prove effective. As literature circles are not simply one-time occurrences, neither should the assessment. As Daniels (1994) suggests, "literature circles should be encouraged by formative assessments, which provide feedback for the students and allows them to

grow as their skills for working in a group, understanding literature, analyzing literature and their critical thinking skills grow” (p. 160).

According to Cooper’s (1997) text entitled *Literacy: Helping Students Construct Meaning*, the following methods for assessment are encouraged for successful literature circles:

- Self-assessment
- Peer Assessment
- Observations
- Conferences
- Portfolios
- Extension Projects
- Student Artifacts (p. 559)

To most, these forms of assessment look different from what NCLB has warped us into thinking when we hear “assessment.” It is purposeful that Daniels (1994) suggests that most assessment in literature circles should be formative in nature (p. 160). As Fall, Webb & Chudowsky’s (2000) more recent research suggests, “formative feedback and classrooms that encourage discussion have a positive effect on student achievement and reading comprehension” (p. 932).

With a better understanding of how literature circles operate and should be assessed, one needs to better understand how literature circles are entrenched in pedagogical philosophy.

How Are Literature Circles Supported by Pedagogical Theory?

The essential feature of literature circles that differs from a teacher-centered model is their reliance on collaborative learning. This approach to learning is essentially Vygotskian. According to Lee & Smagorinsky (2000), Vygotsky’s theory of the Zone of Proximal Development supports that there is an inherent social nature to learning. Smith & MacGregor (1992) adds that one of the reasons a collaborative learning approach seems more effective is that collaborative learning “immerses students in challenging tasks and with challenging questions” (p.1). Therefore, students are encouraged to learn by solving problems and coming up

with their own answers, rather than attempting to apply what they have been previously told. Through collaborative learning, students have an invested interest to own their learning, rather than being passive recipients.

In addition to a collaborative learning approach, literature circles have also grown out of a substantial body of critical theory research. Most prominently, literature circles have grown out of Rosenblatt's (1938) theory of reader-response criticism. As Daniels (2002) claims, "It was [Rosenblatt's] fundamental insight ... that a text is just ink on a page until a reader comes along and gives it life" (p. 38). Daniels continues that it was Rosenblatt's reader-centered approach to literary criticism that "debunked the traditional notion" that there was only one correct interpretation of the text, but rather "there were multiple interpretations" of the text and that each reader would interpret the text differently based on their "prior experience" (p. 38). Probst (1988) helped to bring Rosenblatt's theory into the context of a K-12 classroom. Probst proclaimed:

When our mothers read us *Mother Goose*, we enjoyed the rhythms of the language without analyzing the political or social significance of nursery rhymes. Later, we listened to "Little Red Riding Hood," not to identify characteristics of a fairy tale, but to find out whether or not the wolf had the little girl for dinner. Later still, we read *Catcher in the Rye*, not to investigate Salinger's style and trace the literary influences of his book, but to see how Holden Caulfield copes (p. 3).

Probst's rather simple explanation highlights an important concept. Reader-response criticism as a teaching strategy places value on student-initiated analysis, promotes open-ended discussion, and encourages students to explore their own thinking and trust their own responses. As the research suggests, when students are more engaged they perform better (Schoon, Parsons & Sacker, 2004, p. 383). It is this theoretical approach of literature circles that separates it from the teacher-centered approach and allows the students to explore and find their own meanings and understandings of the text (Witt, 2007, p. 180). In addition, the reader-response elements of literature circles require "students to use higher level thinking skills in authentic conversations" (Witt, 2007, p. 188). As Brabham & Villaume (2000) concludes literature circles' focus on students' higher level thinking skills

helps to “develop thoughtful, competent and critical readers” (p. 279). These are the exact kind of readers and students that teachers are trying to develop in order to reverse the downward trend in comprehension and critical thinking, and to prepare students for today’s marketplace.

Ultimately, the theoretical research supports that literature circles help build higher level thinking skills in students, but what exactly are these higher level thinking skills?

Literature circles and Bloom’s Taxonomy

Ann Ketch’s (2005) article suggests that as readers read a text they are also simultaneously making connections with their own experiences and questioning those connections. As the reader works through the text, they begin to retell and synthesize what has happened, and they infer what those events mean and what could happen next (Ketch, 2005). To Ketch, this is all part of comprehending a text, and all these skills fall under Bloom’s cognitive domain. When put into the context of literature circles and conversation, both Ketch and Routman (2000) believe that conversation is a critical part to comprehending. Routman (2000) proclaims, “Much of what I know, I know because I have questioned and thought about ideas with others, tried things out, modified stances, talked with colleagues” (p. xxxvi). Thus, it is through the discussion element of literature circles where students are able to develop their understandings of the text. Literature circles allow the students to build comprehension and critical thinking skills in a collaborative environment.

According to Don Clark (2009), Bloom’s cognitive domain is a hierarchical list of thinking skills. The first and most basic skill is knowledge. Knowledge is simply reading something and being able to report back what happened. The knowledge step requires the ability to remember what you have read and recall that knowledge. This is the essence of what Paulo Freire (2008) titles the “*banking method*” (p. 71). The second skill in the cognitive domain is comprehension. This skill translates into reading as the ability to take the knowledge gleaned and present it in one’s own words. The next level, application, is the ability to take something learned in one context or situation and apply it to a different situation or context. In

the analysis stage, students are able to distinguish between facts and inferences and can separate what was learned into an organized structure. Part of building this organized structure spills into the next level, synthesis, which is the ability to take multiple parts and to put them back together into one. And finally, Bloom's highest level of the cognitive domain is the ability to evaluate what has been learned.

As Ketch (2005) suggests, these skills, as defined in Bloom's cognitive domain, are accented through the implementation of literature circles. Group discussion allows students to "understand the text on a deeper level" (p.12). However, as Daniels (2002) reminds, these higher level thinking skills will not always naturally occur in literature circles, but must be encouraged through the use of group roles and thoughtful questioning.

Though the research suggests that literature circles help provide an environment that encourages discussion and the use of Bloom's higher level thinking from his taxonomy of the cognitive domain, do literature circles actually help improve reading comprehension abilities among students?

How Do Literature Circles Improve Reading Comprehension?

According to Mather (1992), it would be unfair and unbeneficial to teach reading to all kids the exact same way. It was Mather's (1992) belief that each student learns and processes information differently, and therefore, teachers must use a variety of instructional strategies that can help all students. Furthermore, Mather (1992) believed that there were five essential elements to a good reading program. First, the purpose of reading should be to reconstruct meaning. Second, both teachers and students should be actively participating learners. Third, students should engage in meaningful reading and writing activities. Fourth, students should be engaged and intrinsically motivated. Finally, children's literature (and a variety of literature and texts) should be involved. In addition, Graves, Graves & Braaten (1996) added that reading should be related to students' lives and must activate a students' prior knowledge.

These suggestions, in conjunction with Ketch's arguments for conversational learning, point towards literature circles as a possible solution. In fact, literature

circles can be seen as a solution. According to Leal (1993), literature circles provide a catalyst for meaningful learning. Leal also found that students in literature circles willingly discussed their text 26 percent longer than regular classroom discussions. According to Parker, Quigley & Riley's (1999) research, students in literature circles showed a "marked improvement in reading comprehension, willingness to discuss, enthusiasm for reading and personal student autonomy and accountability" (p. 69-70). In fact, students in the literature circles were three times more likely to score at grade level on the Woodcock & Johnson (1990) reading level grade test. Parker, Quigley & Riley also found that the students who were labeled at-risk benefited the most from literature circles.

The theoretical basis for literature circles is strong and matches up to data that supports literature circles' ability to improve student reading comprehension. Is there a link between comprehension and student achievement? The U.S. Department of Education (2008) claims that 97 percent of schools that reported an increase in student achievement credit this success to programs that help build reading comprehension scores (www.ed.gov/nclb/methods/reading). In addition, Topping, Samuels & Paul's (2007) study of 45,670 students also found a correlation between reading comprehension and overall student achievement.

Due to the deep theoretical basis that suggests literature circles can be an effective tool in improving how students read and learn, and the research-based evidence that suggests literature circles' ability to improve student engagement, reading comprehension and overall student achievement, one should be encouraged to implement literature circles in their classroom. Fewer studies were found focusing on whether literature circles improve and nurture critical thinking skills in students. In fact, due to today's educational climate, it is important that teachers continue to seek new methods of engaging students and developing students' critical thinking and comprehension skills. However, for too long, teachers have incorporated instructional practices that they have felt worked the best. Teachers cannot continue to implement strategies without proof that these strategies garner the results they are expecting. This is the very purpose of this research project; to incorporate new instructional strategies, and seek to prove their effectiveness

compared to the typical way of teaching. Teachers can no longer continue the same teaching practices and expect different results.

Methods

Literature circles have a rich history in the research. However, from the research one can understand that there are many moving parts in the implementation of literature circles in the classroom. In order to effectively use literature circles as a teaching tool, one must have an understanding of their students, the content and their assessments. According to Noe's (2006) informational website (www.litcircles.org), "literature circles require careful implementation and understanding."

In order to measure the effectiveness of literature circles in a twelve grade classroom, the researcher needs to have a solid understanding of the students, as well as, how to implement literature circles.

Setting

The literature circles, along with the researcher's observations, assessments and all student-completed writings will be conducted solely within a secondary language arts classroom at a high school located in rural Appalachia.

This high school holds approximately 476 students (9-12th grades) and is an "Effective" designated school by the Ohio Department of Education (ode.state.oh.us). In the year of 2008-2009, this high school met nine indicators (out of 12), and fell short of meeting the Adequate Yearly Progress goal. As a school, this high school did not meet the state requirements on the 10th grade science test (65 percent; state standard is 75 percent) and did not meet the requirement for attendance rate (92.8 percent; state standard is 93 percent) and graduation rate (89.5 percent; state standard is 90 percent).

In terms of language arts, 79.6 percent of this high school's 10th graders passed the state test for reading. While this high school certainly surpassed the state minimum of 75 percent, the school still scored well below the state average of 85 percent. In addition to reading, 83.2 percent of the high school's students passed

the 10th grade state test for writing. Again, while the students scored above the minimum needed to pass, they still scored well below the state average of 90 percent. By 12th grade, 96.9 percent of the high school's students had passed the reading and writing tests. At this point of the state standardized testing the high school's students were well beyond the state averages of 93 percent in reading and writing. Needless to say, this high school's students are a little better advantaged in terms of academic achievement than students attending an at risk school in a poorer district. However, these particular students and members of the school district certainly lack the resources of some higher achieving schools in the Cincinnati and Columbus suburbs. Either way, these school report cards can only suggest so much. The State Graduation Test is more concerned with concrete, formulaic knowledge and does not concentrate heavily on abstract and critical thinking skills. Therefore, there is still a need to focus in on the language arts students' reading comprehension and critical thinking skills through literature circles.

Participants

The researcher teaches three sections of the twelfth grade college preparatory language arts class (CP English). The students in these three sections are typically higher achieving students who are on track to attend college after graduation. The researcher also teaches one section of twelfth grade general language arts (General English). The students in the General class are typically not college bound due to behavioral or academic reasons.

The first class of the day is the General English class, which consists of 24 students. 23 of these students are Caucasian and one student is half Native American. Ten of the students in the General English class have designated individual educational plans (IEPs). Half of these IEPs are designated for behavioral problems. These students require special attention, but they do not receive any academic accommodations. The other five students have IEPs for academic reasons. These students tend to learn and complete assignments at a slower pace; therefore, there are academic accommodations made to provide the students more time to finish certain assignments.

The second class of the day is a CP English class, which consists of 24 students. All 24 students are Caucasian. None of the students in this class has a designated IEP.

The third class consists of 26 students. 25 of the students in this class are Caucasian and one student is of mixed race. None of the students in this class has a designated IEP.

The fourth class consists of 13 students, all of whom are Caucasian. None of the students in this class has a designated IEP.

In total, there are 87 students in these four sections of twelve grade language arts. 97 percent are Caucasian and 11 percent have a designated IEP. Certainly, this high school is not a bastion of diversity in terms of race. However, these students do have a diverse range of abilities. According to discussions with other teachers in the high school, they believe that less than 40 percent of the students at this particular high school read at their appropriate grade level. If the National Assessment of Educational Progress's (2005) report is correct in their assertion that across the nation only 40 percent of high school seniors read at their appropriate level upon graduation, then as a profession and as a nation of stakeholders, we need to take a deep look into how we can fix this downward spiraling trend.

Obviously, with more than half of the class below the appropriate reading level, it is important to focus in on building their reading abilities, as well as their ability to comprehend and critically analyze the text. In addition, the collaborative learning aspect of literature circles will help the students have more fun with reading. The researcher hopes literature circles will make reading more engaging for the students, as they work together. Working together in the classroom will allow the different abilities of the students to merge and will allow all students to work together to improve their abilities. Students with behavioral disabilities will hopefully be more engaged in the reading and group work, and this will also help to minimize other distractions and build experience of working successfully in collaborative groups. Additionally, the students with academic disabilities will be able to incorporate different strategies to aid them in comprehension, analysis and discussion of the text, especially in terms of the collaborative nature of literature

circles. Overall, literature circles will not be an all-in-one solution to better reading and writing scores on the state standardized tests, but is merely another tool that teachers can use to engage students and promote reading comprehension and critical thinking. Through building these skills, it is assumed that the state test scores can only improve.

Instruments

Three instruments will be used to collect and analyze data. In order to establish better-rounded data two instruments will collect data qualitatively, while one instrument will collect data quantitatively. In addition, all three instruments will be used during the teacher-centered baseline pedagogical approach and during the implementation of literature circles. As a language arts-based research design, it is also important to incorporate reading, writing and communication skills into the collected instruments. The instruments will be used individually and in-group settings, as a pre and a post-test in order to measure data as students progress over the course of this five-week study. The following are the instruments that will be used to gather and analyze the data:

KWL Chart

First, in order to get a sense of students' pre-knowledge (what they comprehend about what they have read before literature circles) and to gain a comparative understanding of the students' post-knowledge (what they comprehend and understand after literature circles) the researcher will use a KWL chart. A KWL chart is a great tool that gives the students a chance to report what they already know, what they still want to know, and what they have learned from the activity. In addition, the KWL chart will have an additional question that serves as an addendum to "what students have learned." The addendum will ask how the students believe they can apply what they have learned. This would provide a better clue to not only what they have individually comprehended, but would also provide some insight into the product of their critical thinking and application skills when cross-compared for evidence of Bloom's Taxonomy of higher level thinking skills in the cognitive domain. Obviously, as a pre-test and post-test indicator this

chart would be the exact same each time the students filled it out. This way, the researcher will be able to identify any differences, and any improvements the students have made due to their involvement in the literature circles.

Journal Writings

The second instrument for data collection that the researcher will implement will be a series of journal writings for the students. Before students break off into their groups they would be given a prompt that would require them to think outside the box and apply some of their knowledge from the novel they are reading. These writings are informal. Although they will be collected and assigned a grade for the purposes of this research, the students will never see this grade and it will not affect their individual averages. Instead, these writings will serve as in-class writings and student reflections, applying what they have read and discussed. In addition, these writings and their prompts would help to spark group discussions as well. These writings will be collected from the students and assigned a number-grade based on a rubric that measures the student's ability to apply the knowledge they are gaining from their readings and group discussions. More specifically, this grade will attempt to quantify their critical thinking and analysis skills as taken from Bloom's Taxonomy in order to better measure their progress. These writing prompts will be completed each day prior to the literature circles in order to gain a good base average for each class section before their literature circles began for that day. Over the course of the five-week study, it is the researcher's hope that the scores attached to these in-class writing prompts will increase as students' critical analysis and application skills improve while working with literature circles. This instrument will serve as a measurement of the students' ability to demonstrate these skills in terms of Bloom's Taxonomy through their writings.

Observations

The third instrument used for data collection will be the researcher's observations of the individual literature circle groups. In an effort to analyze the group discussions through individual observations, the researcher will evaluate these discussions using Bloom's Taxonomy to categorize their conversations. The

researcher will look for instances in which the group discussions are focused on knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. By organizing the group discussions in this way, the researcher can better analyze the effectiveness of literature circles in building the skills as identified within Bloom's Taxonomy. Logistically, the researcher will focus on observing one particular group each class period in order to concentrate their full attention on their discussions. Due to the extended period of time that the students will spend working in literature circles, the researcher will be able to observe each group multiple times in order to gather accurate observations of the students' ability to demonstrate their reading comprehension and critical thinking skills.

These three instruments will help paint a more detailed picture for how literature circles are functioning within the classroom and in what specific ways literature circles are helping the students to build the skills that will help to ensure that they are adequately prepared for the twelve grade proficiency test and/or college entrance exams. In addition to testing, these measures will help provide feedback on how well the students are being better prepared to tackle the bigger problems that they will face in the future, within the context of an ever-changing society and job marketplace.

Procedure

It is very important that this outlined procedure be strictly followed. Through the establishment of a baseline, the proper implementation of the literature circles and the careful collection and analysis of the data, the researcher will be better able to understand if and how literature circles are effective in this high school's twelve grade language arts classroom. In order to answer the original research question, these outlined procedures must be followed.

Establishing a Baseline

Before literature circles can be implemented in the classroom, a baseline must be established. In order to understand the effectiveness of literature circles in this twelve grade classroom, the researcher must have other data in which to

compare it. A baseline creates a point of reference to which the collected data can be cross-compared.

In order to establish a baseline the next five weeks will be split into individual week blocks. For the first week of class, students will participate in teacher-centered language arts lessons working with a single text that the entire class is expected to read. This is the *typical* way in which a language arts classroom is conducted. Students will begin each class by writing in their journals on a prompt that helps them connect their text with their own lives or the world around them. After the students have finished their journal entries, they will briefly discuss and share some of the entries with the class in order to lead the class into the reading and analysis of the text. Then students will fill out the first column of their KWL chart describing what they already know about the text or the day's assigned reading. The teacher will then lead the discussion and reading of the text. As the teacher lectures about the text, students will take notes in their notebooks and answer questions when the teacher calls on them. The teacher's lecture and examination of the day's readings will conclude with 5-7 minutes left in the period. With the remaining time, students will complete their KWL chart filling in what they learned that day, how they think they can apply this knowledge and what they want to find out or learn about tomorrow. Before students leave for their next class, the teacher will collect the individual KWL charts and the writing prompts. At the end of the day, the teacher will jot down their observations of the student involvement in the class lecture. Specifically, the teacher will remark on whether students were able to make any comments that related to Bloom's Taxonomy.

This process will continue for each class section, for each day, for the first week in order to establish a baseline for student performance in terms of reading comprehension and critical thinking skills. In order to establish this baseline it is imperative that all three instruments be used in the same manner that they will be used during the literature circles.

During the second week, students will be working in student-centered literature circle groups. On the first day of the second week, students will be introduced to literature circles. The individual roles will be explained to students

providing them with how each role is performed and the expectations for each role. In addition, each role will be modeled for the students in order for each student to better understand how to operate within a literature circle group and how to discuss literature within a literature circle group. After any questions about literature circles and/or the individual roles are answered, students will be split up into their weeklong literature circle groups. Each class will consist of 4-5 groups with 5-6 students in each group, except for my third section of CP English, which due to a smaller class size will consist of three groups of 4-5 students. Students will get into their groups and select their individual roles. Due to class periods only being 45 minutes, students will not have much time to do much more. However, this first day will ensure that all the procedural things have been taken care of, so that the next day students can get immediately into their literature circle groups and immediately begin working.

The second day of the second week will serve as a typical day for working with literature circles. Student will come in and sit with their literature circle groups. First, students will write individually in their journals on the writing topic provided. Students will then share and discuss their entries with their group members. After each group member has shared their entries, students will then fill out the first column of their KWL charts on what they know about their text up to this point. Students will then work individually on their own role assignments for the next 15-20 minutes. Once students have spent some time working on their role assignments they will come together as a group to discuss the assigned reading for that day's class. The discussion leader will lead the discussion and will serve to incorporate and facilitate other group members' thoughts and their findings from their role assignments into the group conversation. Group discussions should offer in-depth analysis of the day's assigned reading in a student-centered environment. While students are working in their literature circles, the teacher will be observing one group in particular in order to document and categorize their group discussion and analysis among Bloom's Taxonomy. Although the teacher will be chiefly concerned with the observations of one group, the teacher will certainly have to visit other groups in order to manage classroom behavior and help spark lagging

group discussions. With 5-7 minutes left in the class period, students will fill out the remaining columns of their KWL charts and hand them in. The teacher will also collect the journal writings and will assign tomorrow's reading to be completed for homework. The rest of the week will be completed in this manner for each class period.

On the third week, each class period will go back to working in a teacher-centered atmosphere similar to week one. As with week one, all three instruments will also be used during week three. In establishing the baseline, it is important to revisit the baseline periodically in order to better understand the difference in results from the teacher-centered classroom to the literature circles classroom.

In the fourth week, students will return to working in literature circles. However, students will be placed into different groups and inhabit different roles. No student should ever inhabit the same role twice. Each class period will be conducted in the same manner as week two.

Instead of switching back to the teacher-centered classroom on the fifth week, students will continue to work in literature circle groups. However, week five will be a very short week, due to school scheduling. Students will work in their groups until Wednesday, when the reading and discussion of the novel should be completed. Thursday and Friday of this week will be devoted to studying for and taking the final exam. This procedure will provide data for how twelve grade students respond during two weeks of a typical teacher-centered classroom and two weeks of data with students working in student-centered literature circles (the experiment group). This will provide adequate data to better understand the effectiveness of literature circles in increasing student comprehension and critical thinking skills.

Rather than having control and experiment groups, where one half of students only works within a teacher-centered classroom and the other half of students is only exposed to student-centered literature circles, this study will require all twelve grade students to participate in both the teacher-centered classroom and student-centered literature circles. This will be done in order to make sure to collect the most data possible for both classroom approaches. Due to

each student participating in both classroom environments, it is extremely important that a baseline is established in order to effectively compare the data gathered from the students working in the teacher-centered classroom and the students working in literature circles.

Implementing Literature circles

As mentioned in the research literature, in order to ensure successful and meaningful literature circles, the teacher will need to first model the roles and functions of the literature circles in order to familiarize students with the process on which they will embark.

After the students are familiar with the idea of literature circles and comfortable with how to fulfill the various roles, the students will form four to five groups per section, with each group member inhabiting a different role. The instructor will provide a brief introductory overview of each book in order to give the students an idea of each book's plot. Due to similar class sizes, each literature circle group will be similar in number of student members.

Once the groups are formed, students will work together to assign and volunteer for different group roles. After the logistics of the group are established students will individually fill out a KWL chart based on the book they are about to read. In addition to the individual chart, students will work as a group to fill out a group KWL chart. Both charts will be handed in to instructor. The individual KWL charts will be handed in at the end of each day, while the group KWL chart will be introduced at the beginning of the week and will be finished and handed in at the end of the week. The group KWL chart will serve as an overall pre and post-test, while the individual KWL charts will serve as an incremental pre and post-test.

In addition to the KWL chart, before each literature circle group session students will also write individually based on a writing prompt. This writing will be informal and will not affect the students' grades. However, the journal writings will be handed in and scored by the instructor based on a rubric that measures the students' writings using Bloom's Taxonomy to classify their higher order thinking and communicating skills. Both the KWL charts and the journal writings will be

used as instruments to measure student progress throughout the implementation of teacher-centered classes and literature circle classes.

In terms of observations, each group (four to five groups per class section) will be observed at least once per week. All observations will be categorized using Bloom's Taxonomy.

Student grades for these final five weeks of the year will be based on student completion of journal writings and KWL charts, group participation during literature circles and the individual role assignments. During the teacher-centered portions over the next five weeks, students will be graded on their participation in classroom lectures and any writing or comprehension assignments and/or quizzes and the completion of their journal writings and KWL charts.

Outlining the Content

The researcher does not have the ability to alter the curriculum that is already in place at this high school. During the last five weeks of the school year, the twelve grade English classes work with a fiction novel that is selected by the curriculum leader and the head of the high school English department. For this five-week study, students in the three sections of CP English will be reading and discussing F. Scott Fitzgerald's (1925) novel, *The Great Gatsby*. Students in the one section of General English will be reading and discussing Paul Fleischman's (1998) novel, *Whirligig*. These novels will be used during both the teacher-centered classroom approach and when the students are working in literature circles.

Typically, literature circles utilize the element of choice in order to provide students with a truly student-centered environment. Usually students would be placed into their literature circle groups based on the text with which they wanted to explore. This would result in a classroom in which each literature circle group would be concentrating on a different text. Unfortunately, due to various limitations of this study, the literature circle groups in this study will all have to be reading the same novel. While this does somewhat limit the student choice element of literature circles, it should not drastically affect the results of this study.

Data Analysis

Data will be collected and analyzed in three different sections, based on the three different instruments.

First, all journal writings will be collected and scored using a rubric created from Bloom's Taxonomy. This rubric will establish a number grade per journal writing. Once the data is collected, it will be analyzed based on the individual student's ability to demonstrate high-level connections between their own lives and the text in the journals. This analysis will highlight the difference between teacher-centered classrooms and literature circles classrooms. Due to the numerical score values, this data will be collected and analyzed quantitatively.

Second, all KWL charts will be collected. Both the individual and group KWL charts will be analyzed as a pre and post-test. The multiple columns of the KWL charts will be used to assess different aspects of the students' knowledge throughout the day (individual KWLs) and over the week (group KWLs). The first column of the KWL charts asks students to write down what they already know about the topic or the reading for that day. This column serves as a pre-test and will help to establish the students' prior knowledge when entering that class that day. This prior knowledge serves as a starting point from which to measure the results from that day or week during both the literature circles and the teacher-centered classroom approaches.

The second column of the KWL chart will establish what the students want to learn or find out about during the day's lesson or over the weeklong lesson. Is the first column is the starting line, the second column helps to determine the course that the student expects or would like to follow. The second column, when compared to the third column, will help to better understand whether the teacher-centered classroom or the student-centered literature circles better satisfied student expectations of the day's or week's learning.

The post-test portion of the KWLs will be determined by the third column, which asks the students to describe what they have learned during that day or over the course of that week. When the third column data is compared to the first column data, the results will allow me to measure the amount and type of learning

that has occurred during that day and over the course of the week when working with either a teacher-centered classroom approach or with literature circles. All of the data collected from the KWL charts will be analyzed qualitatively. Specifically, the researcher will identify statements made on the KWL charts by the students that correlate with the different levels of Bloom's Taxonomy of the cognitive domain. The researcher is looking for evidence that the students are able to communicate more than a basic understanding of the text, but rather can analyze and evaluate what they are gathering from the text. According to Bloom's hierarchical taxonomy, the ability to analyze and evaluate require higher-level thinking skills than the ability to recite facts or comprehend storylines.

Finally, the observations will also be collected and analyzed qualitatively with relationship to Bloom's Taxonomy of higher level thinking. Statements of analysis, synthesis, application, comprehension, knowledge and evaluation will be compared between the teacher-centered classrooms and the literature circles.

Results

After completing the five-week study, all of the instruments were collected and the results were analyzed in order to better determine the effectiveness of literature circles in twelve grade language arts classrooms.

Results of Journal Writings

The journal writings were analyzed in a quantitative manner based off a rubric, which assigned scores to levels of thinking found in Bloom's Taxonomy to the student's writing. In particular, the rubric focused on the student's ability to connect and apply concepts from the book into relevant examples from their own lives.

The rubric was used to assign a point value to the student's writings. Due to the hierarchical nature of Bloom's Taxonomy, the scoring system was weighted to give a greater numerical value to higher level thinking skills and a lesser numerical value to Bloom's lower level thinking skills. Therefore, a higher numerical score means that there were more instances of higher level thinking present in the student's writing (Rubric attached in the Appendix B). If literature circles really do

help cultivate and develop higher level thinking skills then the numerical results for the student's writings should be greater during literature circles (weeks two, four and five) as compared to the journal writings during the teacher-centered classroom environment (weeks one and three).

During week one, students wrote on five journal topics within a teacher-centered classroom environment. For the first period General English class the week's average was a 2.23. The second period CP English class averaged 2.53. The third period CP English class averaged 2.6 per entry and the fifth period CP English class average 2.68 per entry. Therefore, overall, all of the English classes averaged a score of 2.51 on their first week's journal entries in a teacher-centered environment. In tangible terms, this numerical value means that students' writings had evidence of knowledge recovery, comprehension of elements of the text and some students were able to apply their knowledge and comprehension to different situations (application of knowledge). Most students who had evidence of the application stage of Bloom's Taxonomy in their writings attempted to compare elements of the story to their own lives. While this is good, application of knowledge was also the very point and nature of the journal writings.

Over the course of the second week, students' first week using literature circles, there was a slight increase in the numerical score for the journal writings. The average for the English students during week two was 2.64 per journal entry. When students switched back to a teacher-centered environment on week three, students averages still climbed to an overall 2.78 per topic entry. During week four, as students shifted back into new literature circle groups, scores continued to rise with students averaging 2.89 per topic entry. This numerical score means that almost all the students' writings had evidence of applying what they know and have read to their own lives or a different situation outside the text. For the three days during week five that students wrote in their journals the average score surprising dropped from week four to 2.82 per topic entry.

Certainly, the numbers do not jump out as being overly impressive or as clearly determining that literature circles are more effective than a teacher-centered environment; however, this may be representative of a design flaw rather than

literature circles' actual inability to prove more effective than a teacher-centered approach. The scores from the journal entries may have continued to increase each week because students were becoming more familiar with them as they continued to write in their journals each day. As students became more familiar with the assignment, and with more practice, it makes logical sense that the students would perform better over the course of the five-week study. Although the scores did drop the final week, this is most likely attributed to students not providing a maximum effort during the last week of school, especially with high school graduation around the corner.

Next time it would make sense for the students to work with the journal entries on a more limited basis to prevent students from improving simply through practice and repetition. In addition, another way to combat interference from outside variables would be to split the students into a control group and an experiment group. This would prevent the students' improvement in skill as a result of working with literature circles from bleeding into the assessments for the teacher-centered classroom.

Although the journal entries did not provide a conclusive result in favor of literature circles there are still two other instruments to consult.

KWL Charts

As previously described the KWL charts were used as a pre and post-test to determine how well students were doing on a day-to-day basis and a weekly basis, whether they were participating in a teacher-centered environment or in student-centered literature circles. The KWL charts were analyzed qualitatively based on the cognitive domain of Bloom's Taxonomy. In order to better understand the results, one must look at each column separately.

"What I Already Know"

In this column students overwhelmingly supplied answers that heavily evidenced Bloom's knowledge and comprehension statements. For the General English class, when the students would put what they knew about Paul Fleischman's (1998) novel *Whirligig* many would simply give me shorthanded facts, like "Brent

(main character) killed Lea while drunk driving” or “Brent traveled to Seattle to build his first whirligig.” These comments would fall under comprehension of the text in Bloom’s Taxonomy. Students were able to tell me what was happening in the text. Students in the CP English classes would make similar statements about F. Scott Fitzgerald’s (1925) novel *The Great Gatsby*, “Nick is the cousin to Daisy and he finds out that Daisy’s husband, Tom, is having an affair” or “The story takes place on the east coast in the 1920s.” Again, these kinds of statements are helpful, because a teacher needs to make sure that students understand the basics of what is happening in the text. However, these types of statements, knowledge-based or comprehension-based, did not vary in this column throughout all the day-to-day individual KWL charts, nor did it matter whether students were in a teacher-centered environment or student-centered literature circles. Each entry for what the students had learned was either a knowledge-based or a comprehension-based statement.

However, there was a noticeable difference between the individual day-to-day KWL charts and the weeklong group-based KWL charts that were completed by the literature circle groups during week two, week four and over the shortened week five. Although the difference was not as pronounced in the General English class, the CP English classes made some analysis statements in their group-based KWL charts under what they have learned. For example, students in the third period literature circles stated that they had learned that, “Due to Tom’s cheating on Daisy, Daisy is beginning to understand that Tom doesn’t love her, or at least doesn’t love her in the way that Gatsby does. If Gatsby pushes her, Daisy might leave Tom and all of Gatsby’s dreams will come true.” Rather than simply telling me what was happening in the novel, this group took it further and analyzed different characters’ motives and used this as evidence to support their prediction that Daisy may leave Tom for Gatsby. As the classes finished the novel, another group made an evaluative statement claiming, “Gatsby is a tragic figure because we want him to succeed and he doesn’t. This breaks our hearts, because we all hope to become something better and we are crushed when reality smacks us in the face.” Not only did this group make an evaluation of Gatsby as a tragic character, but they supported their opinion

by applying Gatsby's dreams of improving himself to their/the reader's own tragedy of coming up short of being something better or greater than they are or were born into. This kind of evaluative statement is at the top of Bloom's hierarchical taxonomy of higher level thinking. This is the kind of statement from reading literature that teachers dream about hearing. In addition, this example of a well thought out statement would score massively well on a standardized test. Plus, a future employer would certainly cherish an employee who could extrapolate this kind of meaning or supported interpretation from a text or a data set.

"What I Want To Learn"

While this column did not necessarily provide a space to interpret students' higher level thinking skills, it was an important part of the pre and post test assessment. This column helps to ensure that the teacher is listening to and understands what parts of the text, or comprehension of the text, students wanted to know more about or were having trouble with. Most of these statements, whether they were General English or CP English or in a teacher-centered environment or were working with literature circles, focused on questions concerning "Why do we have to read this," "Why do people think this is a good book," or "What is going to happen," "Who is Daisy going to end up with," or "Where does Gatsby get his money?" Most of these questions were related to reading comprehension. Due to the nature of these questions, the teacher could not necessarily steer students towards a particular answer, but instead both the students and the teacher had to keep pushing through and reading the text.

However, depending on one's interpretation, one could interpret the dismissive question of, "Why do we have to read this?" as an application question. If the student was just trying to be *smart*, maybe what they were really asking was, "How are the themes in this novel applicable to my life now?" This is certainly a more thought provoking question than simply, "What will happen next in the text?"

"What I Learned"

While submissions of what students learned were still heavily rooted in knowledge and comprehension, there was a large difference between the depth of

the answers from the teacher-centered classroom and the student-centered literature circles.

What students learned from the teacher-centered classrooms were more heavily focus on comprehension and offered fewer instances of application and analysis-based thoughts. Typically, students answered that they learned that “Gatsby wants Daisy to leave Tom and run away with him” or “Myrtle gets run over by Daisy and Gatsby as they come back from New York City.” While these statements are true, they certainly do not offer much insight or depth into why these events happened or the significance of these events.

However, the student answers to what they learned while working in literature circles provided more depth and incorporated application, analysis and evaluation-based thinking. This depth was evident in both the individual day-to-day student KWL charts and the weeklong group KWL charts. Students provided evaluation statements like, “Tom deserved to die because he was the one who was sleeping with Myrtle, which is why George was so upset. Plus, Gatsby didn’t deserve to die because he wasn’t the one who ran over Myrtle, Daisy was.” One group also stated that, “Gatsby’s dream was crushed by other people’s greed. The American dream is not about money; it is about happiness and opportunity. We all think it is about money, which is what the author is trying to get at.” These particularly enlightened statements show the depth of the students’ thinking while working in literature circles. Again, students are not just merely telling the teacher what they have read, but they are trying to explain the significance of what they have read, especially in terms of their own lives, as evidenced by the broader commentary on the American dream.

Although the numbers attached to the journal writings were lower than hoped for and did not offer much difference between the teacher-centered and student-centered environments, the KWL charts helped to set these two environments apart from one another. Through the analysis of the KWL charts, one can clearly see that there is more evidence of higher level thinking in KWL charts that were completed during the student-centered literature circles as compared to the teacher-centered classroom approach.

Observations

Students had a very difficult time adjusting to working in their literature circle groups, especially when they all came together to discuss the text. Oftentimes, students would provide minimal answers to the questions posed by the groups, sometimes these answers would not even be offered in complete sentences. In the first week of working with literature circles, the group discussions retreated into each person very briefly going over their individual assignment. However, by the second go around during weeks four and five, the discussions were much more self-sufficient and required very little stimulation from the teacher. At times, the discussion did not even have to heavily rely on the discussion leader. These more developed conversations took place as students became more comfortable with talking about literature with their peers, but also as the events in *The Great Gatsby* began to spiral into a crash course.

One literature circle group got into a discussion about which character was most guilty in *The Great Gatsby*. This produced a spirited analytical debate between two members, one who thought Tom was certainly the guilty party and another who thought that Daisy was the manipulator. What was exciting to observe about this discussion was not simply that the students were getting involved, but that the students were using evidence from the novel to support their allegations. This of course takes comprehension a mental step further, by using that information to create an argument or to support a point or a theory. These kinds of skills are certainly important when we think about students succeeding in college and in a competitive market place.

Another group discussed the ending of the novel and how F. Scott Fitzgerald ends with talking about the characters, but then in the next paragraph switches to talking about *we* and how the reader will continue to stretch out and try harder to accomplish something. The group discussed what Fitzgerald meant by this and how we, as readers, should apply the novel to our own lives. Of course, this ties into Bloom's application thinking, where students apply the knowledge that they have gleaned from the text into a different situation. Again, our students should gain

mastery in this extremely important skill and these research findings suggests that literature circles provides students with the opportunity to build these skills

During the teacher-centered classrooms, discussions were obviously limited as students only tended to offer up their opinions when a question was asked. When students were asked by the teacher to provide some analysis or application for the novel, students struggled and the classroom was often filled with silence and puzzled looks. In the teacher-centered environment, students were able to answer knowledge and comprehension-based questions much easier. However, at times, students often hesitated to answer or participate out of fear of appearing to be overly smart or because they assumed that someone else would answer instead. In a student-centered atmosphere, students seemed to be more inclined to participate and over their thoughts.

The analysis of observation data indicates, although it took time for the students to get adjusted to speaking with their peers about the text in their literature circles, the literature circle discussions and participation levels were much more involved and consisted of a higher level of thinking than the teacher-centered classroom environment.

Discussion of the Results

The journal entries were the only instrument that did not yield a definite difference between the teacher-centered environment and the literature circles. In fact, the average scores only seemed to suggest that the students' ability to write and make connections between themselves and the text improved with practice and was completely independent of whether the students were in a teacher-centered or student-centered environment. As previously noted, this is most likely due to how this instrument was implemented in the research design. In addition, the purpose of the journal entries was to make connections between oneself and the text. However, many students did not even meet this requirement as the average score never reached three (which was the amount of points given for evidence of application).

It is unclear why students did not seem to put a full effort into the writing assignments. It is possible that the students had a difficult time relating the contents of the novel to their own lives. *The Great Gatsby* is set in the 1920s among the most opulent and elite members of society. Many of the students may have found it hard to find connections between the setting of this novel and their modern lives in rural southeastern Ohio. Certainly, there are connections, especially in theme, but it is possible that the superficial differences proved too large to hurdle over.

The General English class may have had similar difficulties relating to a character who accidentally murders someone in a drunken driving accident and travels around the country in search of his own self-identity and repentance. Certainly, the students have had regrets and have had to pay the price for their bad decisions. One would think that the students would have been able to relate their own personal experiences to the character in the novel, but because the students may not have experienced Brent's specific plight they had a difficult time relating in their journal entries.

Another reason students may not have given their full effort towards the journal entries was that as the research progressed the teacher spent less class time discussing our journal entries. In the first week, the class spent much of the class time discussing the individual entries and relating their lives to the novel through the classroom discussions. However, as they continued to work with the novel two things happened. First, as a teacher, I began to feel much more comfortable in front of the classroom and no longer felt the need to use the journal entries as a crutch to fill instructional time. Second, as the weeks progressed I felt a growing pressure to finish all of our work with the novel in the allotted amount of time before graduation and final grades were due. As we spent less time in class discussing our journal entries, students may have felt that the journal entries were not as important as some of the other assignments, which could have resulted in students not giving these writings the same amount of effort as they did for other assignments.

Finally, in terms of the journal entries, some of the topic questions were too narrow or did not provide students with enough room to expand upon and show evidence of higher-level thinking. For some topics, it would be very difficult for students to provide evidence of application, analysis or evaluation. Therefore, these journal entries may have been a limited instrument that could only have provided limited insight to the effectiveness of literature circles.

If journal entries are to be used as an instrument in the future, the researcher would need to provide better topics that could allow for more versatile responses from the students that provide more intellectual room to incorporate elements of Bloom's Taxonomy. In addition, in order to provide more distinction between the effectiveness of teacher-centered and student-centered environments to promote higher-level thinking, the researcher would need to construct writing topics that were specifically aimed at addressing evaluative thinking or analytical thinking. Rather than simply asking students to relate an element of the novel to their lives (application), the researcher could have writing prompts that specifically ask students to make a judgment about a character based from our reading (comprehension), support it with evidence from the novel (analysis), and then relate those arguments to an element in their own lives (application). Then, rather than looking for evidence of Bloom's Taxonomy, the researcher could compare and contrast this style of entry between the teacher-centered classroom and the student-centered classroom. This procedural change to the journal entries may yield more distinctive results than what was gathered during this research.

In terms of the KWL charts, a distinct difference was present between the teacher-centered classes and the literature circle classes. The literature circle classes were able to provide more evidence for the presence of higher level thinking in this pre and post-test assessment. Whereas, the teacher-centered classes tended to only rely on knowledge and comprehension thinking. This is not necessarily the students' fault. While teacher-centered environments can certainly promote higher level thinking skills, due to the restrictions on time and the need for ordered discussions between the students and the teacher, teacher-centered classrooms can often easily morph into the *banking method*. As previously advanced by Paulo

Friere, the banking method tends to only support knowledge-based thinking skills, where the teacher gives students the knowledge and then asks them to spit that knowledge back on a test or when the appropriate question is later asked. This process may count as learning to some; however, this process certainly does not help to promote critical or higher level thinking. This assertion is evidenced by the results of the KWL charts. Students in the teacher-centered class relied heavily on knowledge and comprehension-based thinking, while the discussion in the literature circle groups were able to yield higher level thinking skills.

The results from observations also helped to support the effectiveness of literature circles in producing and developing higher level thinking skills. It is through the discussions with their peers that students are able to develop different ideas and understandings of the text. Whereas the teacher-centered classroom tends to stifle the free flow of conversations and ideas in the classroom, literature circles allow for this freedom, which in turn allows students to stretch their thinking, while using their peers as a sounding board and a file to sharpen their individual and collective understanding. Again, this does not mean that higher level thinking skills cannot be present or developed in a teacher-centered environment; however, the data from this research supports that literature circles provide a structure that allows for more freedom and proves more effective in producing evidence of higher level thinking skills.

Finally, there are two warnings worth heeding in terms of implementing literature circles.

First, it is important for educators to understand that there are a lot of moving parts within literature circles. While on one hand this is what makes them more appealing, on the other hand if the educator is not organized or if the educator does not properly prepare students, literature circles could be a drastic failure that resorts into students talking about their weekend plans rather than the novel, or even worse yet, students sitting in unengaged silence. It is extremely important to be very organized; and doing an effectiveness study is a good way to ensure that you are organized in your implementation of literature circles into your classroom.

In addition, due to the many moving parts of literature circles, it can often be difficult to provide a conclusive answer for how effective literature circles are. Literature circles seemed to be somewhat successful and effective in this classroom during this study, but this does not mean that these results will necessarily translate into another classroom or even with another set of students. Thus, as with anything one implements in the classroom, it is important to incorporate assessment measures into one's lessons to ensure that the lessons are effective as one may believe them to be.

Second, it is important to be patient when implementing literature circles. It takes time for students to get used to working with literature circles. It takes time for students to get comfortable talking about literature on their own, rather than answering the teacher's questions and it takes time for students to get used to working in small groups with their peers. With each class that students worked with literature circles they become more comfortable and the quality of discussions and critical thinking increased. Now, imagine if students had worked off and on with literature circles the whole year rather than for three out of the last five weeks of school. Imagine the ways students could develop these skills with more time and practice.

Summary

As technology pushes our society forward and globalization solidifies a world economy and competitive marketplace, the demands on education and educators is increasing. Educators must respond to this new reality and reverse the downward trend in student achievement. In an educational era of accountability, educators need to find innovative ways to challenge their students; challenging students not only to pass a standardized test, but also to develop higher-level comprehension and critical thinking skills that will prove useful in the face of 21st century competition.

For English teachers, literature circles can be one of these innovative tools that they can implement in their classrooms. A diverse body of literature and pedagogical theory supports the implementation of literature circles. In short, literature circles provide a student-centered, collaborative learning environment

with an emphasis on conversation and building higher-level comprehension and critical analysis skills. By getting students involved and engaged in the content, students are more likely to increase in their reading comprehension ability, critical thinking skills and their overall achievement.

This research study on the effectiveness of literature circles in increasing higher-level critical thinking skills was designed with previous research in mind and aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of literature circles within the context of a student teacher's work within a twelve grade language arts classroom. Specifically, the literature circles were evaluated in their ability to increase student comprehension, student achievement, critical analysis skills and higher-level thinking as defined by Bloom's Taxonomy of the cognitive domain. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected and analyzed to support literature circles' effectiveness in this specific educational environment.

Literature circles are a great tool for language arts teachers; however, it is an instructional strategy that should be carefully implemented and used in association with a variety of other comprehension and critical thinking strategies throughout the curriculum. In addition, due to the student-centered nature of literature circles, it is important to make sure that one's students are mature enough to properly handle group work and are self-reliant enough to uphold meaningful academic discussions with their own peers. While students may be faced with a little bit of discomfort at first, as my experience suggests, once students are comfortable enough to open up and discuss the novel, some great thinking can ensue.

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Appendix A

Discussion Sheet for Literature Circles

Name: _____

Group: _____

Book: _____

Role: _____ Pages: _____

- While you are reading or after you have finished reading, prepare for the circle meeting by assuming the identity of one of the strategists below and completing and then presenting your strategy:

1. **Clarifier:** Your job is to find 5 words or concepts that are important to the story, list and explain each word/concept, and write down its page number.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

2. **Summarizer:** Your job is to prepare a brief summary of the book. You want to convey how the characters are influenced by the various events and how the main conflict contributes to the resolution.

Key Events:

Summary:

3. **Questioner:** Your job is to develop a list of four questions about this book that your circle might discuss. Your task is to help circle members discuss the big ideas in the book and share their reactions. Center your questions on the 5 Ws + How. Be prepared to read aloud key passages that present the answers. List page numbers.

Question 1:

Answer

Question 2:

Answer

Discussion Sheet for Literature Circles, page 2

Question 3:

Answer

Question 4:

Answer

4. **Predictor:** Your job is to predict what you think will happen next in this story. After each prediction defend your reasoning.

Based on what I have read, I predict that the following events will happen:

1.

Why:

2.

Why:

3.

Why:

Literature Circles Role Sheet

Summarizer

Name _____ Circle _____

Book _____

Meeting Date _____ Assignment: Pages _____ to _____

Summarizer: Your job is to prepare a brief summary of today's reading. Your group discussion will start with your 1–2 minute statement that covers the key points, main highlights, and general idea of today's reading assignment.

Summary:

Key Points:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Connections: What did today's reading remind you of?

Literature Circles Role Sheet

Discussion Director

Name _____ Circle _____

Book _____

Meeting Date _____ Assignment: Pages _____ to _____

Discussion Director: Your job is to develop a list of questions that your group might want to discuss about this part of the book. Don't worry about the small details; your task is to help people talk over the big ideas in the reading and share their reactions. Usually the best discussion questions come from your own thoughts, feelings, and concerns as you read. You can list them below during or after your reading. You may also use some of the general questions below to develop topics for your group.

Possible discussion questions or topics for today

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Sample questions

- What was going through your mind while you read this?
- How did you feel while reading this part of the book?
- What was discussed in this section of the book?
- Can someone summarize briefly?
- Did today's reading remind you of any real-life experiences?
- What questions did you have when you finished this section?
- Did anything in this section of the book surprise you?
- What are the one or two most important ideas?
- What are some things you think will be talked about next.

Topic to be carried over to tomorrow: _____

Assignment for tomorrow: Pages _____ to _____

Literature Circles Role Sheet

Investigator*

Name _____ Circle _____

Book _____

Meeting Date _____ Assignment: Pages _____ to _____

Investigator: Your job is to dig up some background information on any topic related to your book. This might include

- the geography, weather, culture, or history of the book's setting
- information about the author — her/his life and other works
- information about the time period portrayed in the book
- pictures, objects, or materials that illustrate elements of the book
- the history and derivation of words or names used in the book
- music that reflects the book or its time.

This is *not* a formal research report. The idea is to find bits of information or material that helps your group better understand the book. Investigate something that really interests you — something that struck you as puzzling or curious while you were reading.

Sources for information

- the introduction, preface, or "about the author" section of the book
- library books and magazines
- on-line computer search or encyclopedia
- interviews with people who know the topic
- other novels, nonfiction, or textbooks you've read

Topic to be carried over to tomorrow: _____

Assignment for tomorrow: Pages _____ to _____

* Adapted from *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom* by Harvey Daniels (Stenhouse Publishers: York, Maine, 1994. Published in Canada by Pembroke Publishers, Markham, Ontario, 1994).

Literature Circles Role Sheet

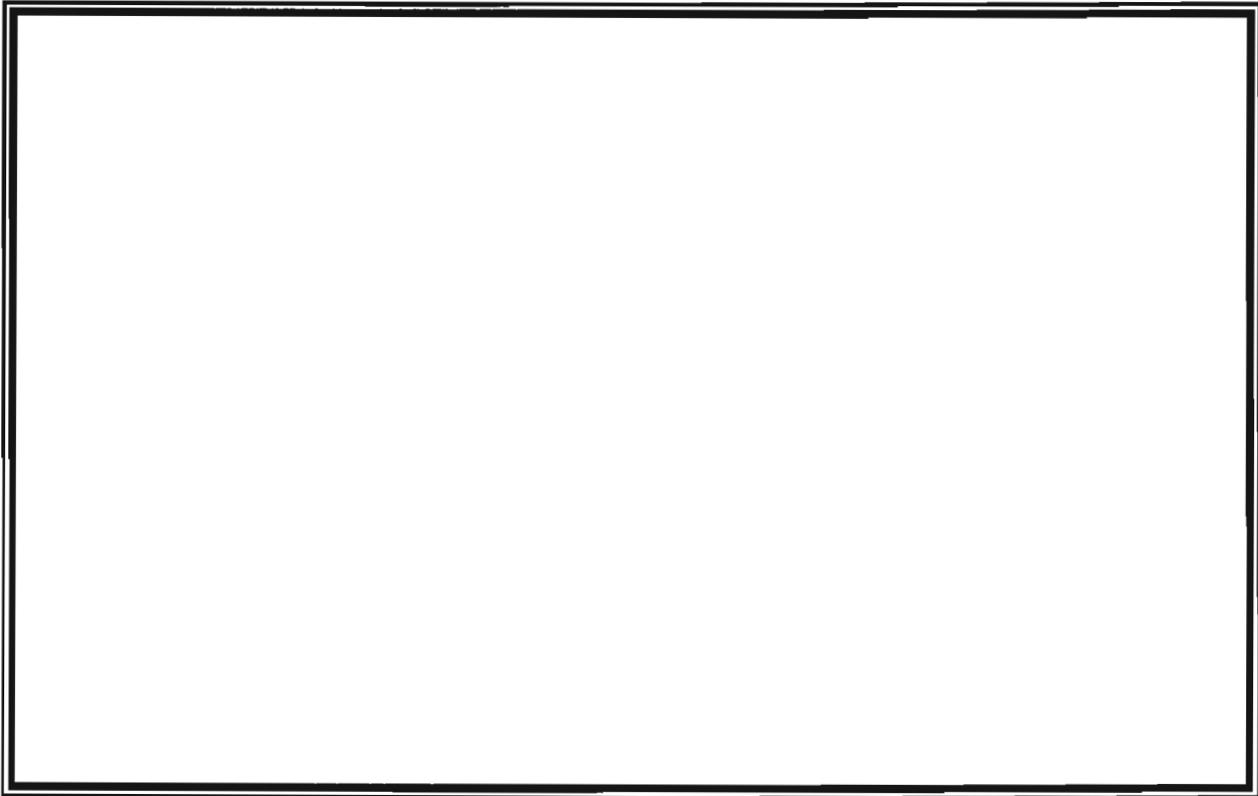
Illustrator*

Name _____ Circle _____

Book _____

Meeting Date _____ Assignment: Pages _____ to _____

Illustrator: Your job is to draw some kind of picture related to the reading. It can be a sketch, cartoon, diagram, flow chart, or stick figure scene. You can draw a picture of something that is discussed specifically in your book, something that the reading reminded you of, or a picture that conveys any idea or feeling you got from the reading. Any kind of drawing or graphic is okay. You can even label things with words if that helps. Make your drawing on this paper. If you need more room, use the back.



Connections: What did today's reading remind you of?

* Adapted from *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom* by Harvey Daniels (Stenhouse Publishers: York, Maine, 1994. Published in Canada by Pembroke Publishers, Markham, Ontario, 1994).

Literature Circles Role Sheet

Connector*

Name _____ Circle _____

Book _____

Meeting Date _____ Assignment: Pages _____ to _____

Connector: Your job is to find connections between the book your group is reading and the world outside. This means connecting the reading to your own life, happenings at school or in the community, similar events at other times and places, or other people or problems that this book brings to mind. You might also see connections between this book and other writings on the same topic or other writings by the same author. There are no right answers here. Whatever the reading connects *you* with is worth sharing!

Some connections I found between this reading and other people, places, events, authors:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

Topic to be carried over to tomorrow: _____

Assignment for tomorrow: Pages _____ to _____

* Adapted from *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom* by Harvey Daniels (Stenhouse Publishers: York, Maine, 1994. Published in Canada by Pembroke Publishers, Markham, Ontario, 1994).

Literature Circles Role Sheet

Travel Tracer*

Name _____ Circle _____

Book _____

Meeting Date _____ Assignment: Pages _____ to _____

Travel Tracer: When you are reading a book in which characters move around often and the scene changes frequently, it is important for everyone in your group to know *where* things are happening and how the setting may have changed. So that's your job: to track carefully where the action takes place during today's reading. Describe each setting in detail, either in words or with an action map or diagram you can show to your group. You may use the back of this sheet or another sheet. Be sure to give the page locations where the scene is described.

Describe or sketch the setting

- **where today's action begins**
Page where it is described _____

- **where today's key events happen**
Page where it is described _____

- **where today's events end**
Page where it is described _____

Topic to be carried over to tomorrow: _____

Assignment for tomorrow: Pages _____ to _____

* Adapted from *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom* by Harvey Daniels (Stenhouse Publishers: York, Maine, 1994. Published in Canada by Pembroke Publishers, Markham, Ontario, 1994).

Literature Circles Role Sheet

Vocabulary Enricher*

Name _____ Circle _____

Book _____

Meeting Date _____ Assignment: Pages _____ to _____

Vocabulary Enricher: Your job is to be on the lookout for a few especially important words in today's reading. If you find words that are puzzling or unfamiliar, mark them while you are reading and then later jot down their definition, either from a dictionary or from some other source. You may also run across familiar words that stand out somehow in the reading — words that are repeated a lot, are used in an unusual way, or provide a key to the meaning of the text. Mark these special words, and be ready to point them out to the group. When your circle meets, help members find and discuss these words.

Page No. & Paragraph	Word	Definition	Plan

Topic to be carried over to tomorrow: _____

Assignment for tomorrow: Pages _____ to _____

* Adapted from *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom* by Harvey Daniels (Stenhouse Publishers: York, Maine, 1994. Published in Canada by Pembroke Publishers, Markham, Ontario, 1994).

Appendix B

Name _____

Date _____

KWL Chart

Before you begin your research, list details in the first two columns. Fill in the last column after completing your research.

Topic _____		
What I Know	What I Want to Know	What I Learned

Observation Sheet – Bloom's Taxonomy

Date: _____

Class Period: _____

Group Being Observed: _____

Roles Represented

(For confidentiality students will not be referred to by name, but will be referred to by role): _____

COGNITIVE DOMAIN

<u>Level</u>	<u>Keywords</u>	<u>Role</u>	<u>Discussion</u>
Knowledge	Terms, facts, summarizations, events, characters, generalizations, vocabulary, etc.		
Comprehension	Demonstrating understanding of facts – organizing, comparing, translating, interpreting, giving descriptions, main ideas, etc.		
Application	Apply acquired knowledge to new situations		

<p>Analysis</p>	<p>Examine and break information into parts – provide analysis, make inferences and support with evidence</p>		
<p>Synthesis</p>	<p>Compile information together in a new way – Combine different parts of the text, make abstract associations among different sets of data</p>		
<p>Evaluation</p>	<p>Present or defend ideas and validity of opinions based on information – internal and external</p>		

Journal Writings Bloom's Taxonomy Rubric

	<i>Times Evidenced</i>	<i>Weight</i>	<i>Explanation</i>
Knowledge	X	1	Exhibit memory of previously learned materials by recalling facts, terms, basic concepts and answers
Comprehension	X	2	Demonstrative understanding of facts and ideas by organizing, comparing, translating, interpreting, giving descriptions and stating main ideas
Application	X	3	Using new knowledge to solve problems to new situations.
Analysis	X	4	Examine and break information into parts by identifying motives and causes. Make inferences that are supported by evidence
Synthesis	X	5	Compile information together in a different way by combining elements to make alternative solutions
Evaluation	X	6	Present opinions and defend by making judgments on information, validity of ideas, etc.