

**GRAND CONVERSATIONS,
THOUGHTFUL RESPONSES**

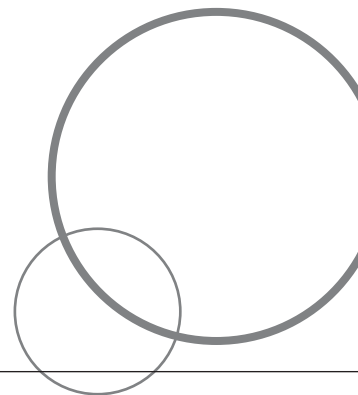
**A Unique Approach
to Literature Circles**

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PORTAGE & MAIN PRESS

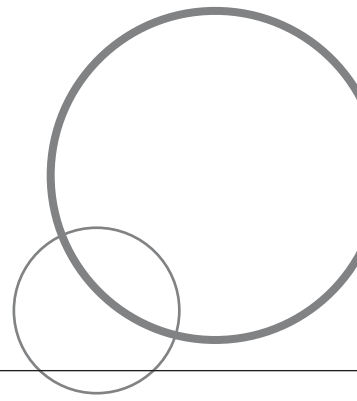
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INTRODUCTION



Many books have been written about literature circles, an organizational strategy whereby students read a variety of novels and have group discussions about their reading. What distinguishes the approach that I have developed and present in this book is that students have a choice in what they read and in how much they read. They are not assigned roles in their discussion groups. And they are not required to read at the same pace as the other students in their discussion group; they do not have a set number of pages or chapters to read each day. What also distinguishes this approach is that it results in stronger, more sophisticated readers. Students engage in what educational scholar Gordon Wells calls “grand conversations”; they come up with thoughtful responses, and they read and read and read some more! I believe that all students can and do become powerful, enthusiastic readers if we provide them with a choice of great books and create a flexible framework in which they can talk about the books they choose to read.

I have been developing this approach for the past fifteen years. When I began, I was working as a resource teacher in an elementary school where we were trying to increase the amount of reading done by our intermediate students. As was common practice then, we were moving away from basal readers to a combination system that included the whole class reading each novel at the same time, individualized reading (where students chose their own books, read at their own rate, and conferenced individually with the teacher) and USSR (uninterrupted, sustained, silent reading). This worked for some students. But, for others, the whole-class novel was frequently too hard for them to read independently. These students tended to engage

in “fake reading” during USSR and develop extravagant avoidance strategies during individualized reading, which amounted to very little actual reading done. We were not pleased with the progress in reading of our students and knew we had to do better. We knew from the synthesis of research by Fielding and Pearson about what works in reading: that students needed ample opportunities to read, explicit teaching of comprehension strategies, opportunities for peer and collaborative learning, and conversation and writing in response to their reading. This was the birth of the version of literature circles that I present here.

During the time I’ve been developing this approach, I have continued to teach part-time but have also worked extensively in staff development. I have continued to refine my approach to literature circles through demonstration lessons in which teachers observe and reflect on the lessons, through ongoing workshops in which teachers work to implement the approach to literature circles with their own students, and through teaching university courses in which I listen to the voices and acknowledge the expertise of teacher-learners. I first wrote of this approach in the book I wrote in 1998 with Catherine Feniak entitled *Student Diversity*, which provides a forum for responses from experienced teachers, and I learned from these responses. What you read in *Grand Conversations, Thoughtful Responses: A Unique Approach to Literature Circles* is my current thinking on what has grown to be a powerful strategy for developing sophisticated readers, expanded now to readers in Grades 2 or 3 to Grade 12.

Over the past fifteen years, I have noticed several significant shifts in my practice and in the students’ responses:

- As students gained more control over *what was read* (i.e, choosing their own books rather than me or the group determining appropriate books) and *how much was read* (i.e., students taking the books home and reading the whole book in a night if they chose to, rather than me determining how much the whole class would read), they read more.
- As I became more skilled at teaching them how to talk about books, students’ conversations became more passionate and involved.
- As students became more skilled at talking about books, their conversations helped them come to new understandings about their reading (Wells’s “grand conversations”).

- As I became less a leader in the group and more an equal participant, students assumed the leadership role and were able to talk about what really mattered to them.
- As I reinforced the need that all voices be heard in the group, verbal students began to specifically ask questions of the quieter students, while the quieter students took more seriously their need to contribute to the conversation.
- As I became more explicit in my teaching of response writing, the students became more reflective and more able to write about their thinking about the books.

I was on my way to developing readers who read avidly. This approach is possible in today's inclusive classrooms. The format of openness allows everyone to participate in a meaningful way. Our classrooms need to be communities of learners where all belong. These are the classrooms described in this book.

HOW DOES MY APPROACH TO LITERATURE CIRCLES WORK?

There are several key components to the design of my approach to literature circles:

- A collection of books is made available for the class. In choosing these books, the teacher aims to have about six different titles and five or six copies of each title for a class of thirty. More books need to be available in the collection than there are students in the class; as students will not necessarily be exchanging books at the same time, surplus books need to be available. Within the book collection, there needs to be a title choice that is both readable (at an appropriate reading level) and desirable (something that students will want to read) for each student in the class. And the number of available copies of each title is important. If you had only three copies of a particular title, for example, when the students came together in their discussion group (the group is defined by the students reading a particular book), the group would be too small. Conversely, if you had nine copies of a title, this discussion group would be too large for all participants to have a chance to talk.
- Students meet in discussion groups, twice a week, to talk about the book they are currently reading. The discussion group is made up of all students who are reading the same book at any given time.



ILLUSTRATION 0.1 A literature circle discussion group in action.

A teacher generally joins the discussion group. While the discussion is going on, the other students in the class are reading other books. Because students can read at their own rate, when they meet to discuss the book, they will all be at different parts of the book. Students are encouraged to “tease” other readers (i.e., to encourage them to read on) but not to “spill the beans” about the book.

- Students come to the discussion with a passage from the book that they would like to read aloud as a conversation starter. Other students in the group respond to the conversation starter (the Say Something strategy). The discussion lasts fifteen to twenty minutes.
- As students complete a novel, they return it to the collection and choose another book and join the discussion group for that book.

Sample Pages

- Two or three times a week, students respond in journals to the books they are reading. The choice of journal format changes with the increasing skills of the students.
- Every two weeks, all students complete a comprehension activity based on the novel they have just completed reading.
- Large blocks of time (seventy-five to ninety minutes) are most effective for group discussions.