

# INQUIRY BASED LITERATURE CIRCLES

## Principles of Inquiry Circles

- Choice of topics based on genuine student curiosity, questions, interests
- Digging deeply into complex, authentic topics that matter to kids
- Flexible grouping, featuring small research teams, groups, task forces
- Heterogeneous, non-leveled groups with careful differentiation
- Student responsibility and peer leadership
- Use of proficient-reader/thinker/researcher strategies
- Drawing upon multiple, multi-genre, and multi-media sources
- Going beyond fact-finding to synthesizing ideas and building and acquiring knowledge
- Actively using knowledge in our schools and communities: sharing, publication, products, or taking action
- Matching or “back-mapping” kids’ learning to [provincial] standards  
(Harvey & Daniels, 2009, p. 13)

“We have to show kids explicitly how we, as proficient adult learners, notice and develop questions, how we search out and evaluate information, and how we put knowledge to work and share it with others,” (Harvey & Daniels, 2009, p. 68)

## ***INTRODUCTION (First Class)***

### **1. Background**

If your novels are connected by a unifying theme or universal topic for, introduce this theme to students in the form of a mini-lesson. This could also be a hook to get students intrigued.

### **2. Book Choice**

- a) State the learning intentions at this point. What is it you hope students will be able to do at the end of this unit? What are the main goals? What skills and strategies will they be working on?

Some high-achieving students will be looking for the hoop that they have to jump through and will be anxious to find out what they have to do to finish the task successfully. You can alleviate this anxiety by sharing the learning expectations – what do you hope they will glean from this task? Perhaps you could translate the curricular objectives into student language.

Refrain from providing an exemplar – I have found that providing exemplars limits student creativity for this task – you will receive many replicas of your exemplar and few innovative projects.

- b) Make sure you have a solid understanding of each of the books to be read. If you have a strong understanding of the books, it will be easier for you to help students make appropriate choices. Do book talks for each book (examples of good book talks can be found here: [http://nancykeane.com/booktalks/zusak\\_book.htm](http://nancykeane.com/booktalks/zusak_book.htm) ). Ideally, they will be reading something that is very accessible to them. Resist the temptation to pass judgment on what students choose – if you feel like a student is choosing something that is too easy for them, remember that they may be in group with struggling readers and it might be a good fit. Ask your teacher librarian for help if you are not familiar with the books.
- c) Review strategies on how to choose the “right” book. For example: “Do you like the cover? Does it look interesting to you? How big is the font? Too small? Too big? What does it say on the back? How many pages is the book? Does the novel summary sound interesting to you? Read the first page or two – are there more than 5 words that you don’t understand? If so, the book is too challenging for you. You will get lost in the vocabulary and miss the story.” Allow students to start reading books, encourage them to read the first few pages of a couple of different books to see which ones grab their attention most.
- d) Ensure that you have a number of different reading levels available. Introduce lower level reading books by saying things like: “This would be a good book for people who don’t really like to read” or “This is a quick read with a strong plot”. Introduce more complex novels with, “If you feel like challenging yourself, this is a good choice.”

Additionally, ensure to make adaptations available for students with IEPs. You may have access to a number of audiobooks via ARC BC (<https://www.arc-bc.org/>). You may also have access to Kurzweil at your school – speak with your Special Education teacher. Some students may also struggle with written output – please provide supports for these students as necessary (text-to-speech, scribing, etc.). It is imperative that we provide our identified students with opportunities to challenge themselves; ensuring that they can access and create more complex texts is one way to meet this goal.

- e) Circulate while students are perusing the books and make suggestions accordingly.
- f) Students then pick their top 3 choices and hand them in. You will need a fairly significant amount of time to form the literature circle groups (ie. students will not know their book choice on the same day that they do their top 3 list).

Compile and have a look at the top 3 choices. When you are making the lit circle groups keep reading level, friendships, dynamics and personalities in mind. Who works well together? Who gets distracted? Who might need support to stay focused? This will take some time but if it is thoughtfully done, groups will be much more effective. For the most part, students should end up with their first or second picks. No fewer than 3 students and no more than 4 students per group is ideal.

I would recommend having the same novel groups meet for the first couple of sessions but you can then break it up so that the students are discussing the broad themes with students reading different novels.

### ***Second Class and Beyond***

It is a good idea to review the learning intentions at the beginning of each session and to ask students to self-evaluate: where are they in terms of meeting expectations and their learning?

#### **3. Tasks**

If you have tasks that the students will complete, now is a good time to introduce these (BEFORE students get their books and get into their groups). In terms of tasks, try to steer clear of worksheets and/or role sheets. Concentrate on what you want students to pull out of the texts, what skills you want them to develop and create tasks that will both engage students and have them demonstrate their level of understanding.

Examples:

- students can write a passage as if they are a character in the story
- students can identify the literary devices used in that section of the story and explain their significance
- students can concentrate on character development and identify any major shifts or reveals
- students can discuss how setting is impacting the story and/or characters
- students can be the 'connector' – connect the text to self, world and other texts
- students can be the 'questioner' and come up with a list of higher order thinking questions

Their reading schedule can be dictated by the section task due dates. This is a good place to provide a calendar template for the visual learners so that they can see how much time they have for certain tasks and stay organized. I would recommend that students hand in their tasks as soon as they have completed them and discussed them. That way, you can assess if students are meeting expectations and provide feedback before they complete their second task and give support as necessary.

It makes sense to divide the text up into sections (instead of by chapter) and have students complete different tasks for each section. Depending on grade level and ability, students can divide their books into sections accordingly – seniors can handle three sections, juniors might find 5 or 6 sections more manageable.

It is important to limit student choice so that they are not completing the same task for each section of their book. For example, if there are 6 different tasks to complete for 6 sections of the book, make it mandatory that students complete 4 to 6 of the tasks. Set it up so that group members complete different tasks for each section – that way you can do individual assessment of a variety of skills and provide support where needed.

Each student can have a different task for each section and should share their results with their group. Remember that the primary goal is to have students generate higher order, big questions and to mull these over with their peers. The goal of the tasks is to spur them along and to help them get to questions that dig below the surface.

#### **4. Ground Rules**

Have students gather into their groups and establish ground rules and a reading schedule which is based upon their calendar template. I find that it works well to have students establish their own ground rules with some direction. However, this strategy will vary according to grade and class make up. Some classes will need direct, explicit instruction in group dynamics and what “good” discussion looks like.

Students can make up a list of 3 to 5 rules to follow and ways to re-direct each other if they are not following their group rules. Remind them that their learning will be negatively impacted if someone doesn't complete what they are 'supposed' to do. Additionally, this is good time to show them how they will be assessed on their discussions. (See Literature Circles Rubric)

#### **5. First Impressions**

Students can begin reading! After they have read for 10 or 15 minutes, have them jot down their first impressions. What do they think of the protagonist so far? What do they know about the protagonist? What questions do they have about the story/setting/character/plot? What do they think will happen next?

#### **6. Sharing**

This would be a good time to review the learning intentions with the class if you have not done so recently.

Once students have completed their first impression, they can share with their groups. This is a good time to model appropriate, efficient, respectful group work. Depending on grade level, you may even want to give really concrete examples of what this might look like (ie. actually have a group of teachers model how to do the sharing).

Have students gather in their groups and read each other's first impressions OR they share a brief summary of their first impression. Once students have finished sharing their first impressions, they can discuss what was similar in their impressions. What was different? Do they agree on what is going to happen next? Can they make any connections to their lives/the world? Circulate to ensure conversations are staying on track etc. This is a great time to evaluate student understanding of the

text. Each group should report out about their first impressions. What did they have in common? What was interesting? What are they wondering about?

## 7. Questions

Throughout the school year/semester, you can practice creating higher order questions with your students. This should be something that they are quite familiar with by the time you get to your culminating Inquiry Based Literature Circle task. One way to ensure they will succeed is to make it a part of a check for independent silent reading– ie. every time they have silent reading, they develop a question about or connection to the text. This ensures they are practicing their reading strategies and practicing how to create questions and it also gives you some insight into their reading comprehension. This resource: [http://www.scholastic.ca/education/teaching\\_tip/march2013.html](http://www.scholastic.ca/education/teaching_tip/march2013.html) provides some useful tips and clearly identifies what a “good” inquiry question looks like.

When students return to reading, tell them that they should be jotting down questions that they have about the text as they read (one option is to give them Post – It Notes to do this). Depending on the level of your class, they should complete at least 5 to 10 questions per reading section. These questions will eventually lead to their final inquiry question.

## 8. Routine

It should be very clear to students that they need to do some reading outside of class time. If this is a challenge for your class, and you have to depend on reading the whole of the text during class time, this unit will take a significant amount of time to complete.

I would recommend spending 10-15 minutes reading texts in class time. Additionally, time will be needed to explain section tasks and for completion of these tasks. Students should also spend at least 15 minutes of every class discussing their novels.

Some ideas for maintaining the routine (and your sanity!):

- Folders for each group where students stash their task work, ground rules, instructions, reflections etc.
- Exit slips – students complete exit slips for each class. See Template #4 Exit Slip Prompts for some ideas
- Group and self-assessments for discussions and task completion

## 9. Culminating Task

In all likelihood, students will be somewhat anxious about the final task and will be asking many questions about what is expected of them. The inquiry process is designed to focus on the process instead of the end product. As students work through their books, you can reassure students by informing them that they will be sharing what they have learned through their novel.

Once students have completed their readings and section tasks, they can move on to identifying a primary inquiry question. In their groups, they can run through all of the questions they have created while reading their novels. They should identify and select those questions that show text- to -world and text -to-self connections. They will definitely need some gentle nudging here – you may even want to conduct a lesson about higher order thinking/good inquiry questions as a precursor to this process. I highly recommend collaborating with your teacher librarian or another teacher throughout this entire process.

When students have identified a question that a) they want to know more about, b) is clearly influenced by their reading of the book and c) is worthy of further research, they can begin the research process. For a grade 11 class, this research process took 4 class hours (this was after mini-lessons on school databases and mini-lessons on effective researching).

Students should be reminded that their final “product” should be something that can be shared with a wider audience; it should be something that they would be proud to show members of the broader school community and outside of school community! Ideally, students will complete aesthetically pleasing presentations that clearly demonstrate their understanding of their novel and real world connections.

Please don't hesitate to contact me: [Tanya.hobbs@sd6.bc.ca](mailto:Tanya.hobbs@sd6.bc.ca)