

Reading Round Table: Literature Circles Expand Thought

Discussing books creates a full learning process for students.

by [Alexandra R. Moses](#)

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Maid of Error:

Literature circles can discuss the antics of the title character in *Amelia Bedelia*.

Credit: HarperCollins

The sixth graders sit with their desks pushed together, paperbacks scattered across the makeshift table. The conversation bounces from how a Revolutionary War-era character reacted to the death of his father to a personal story about how one of the students handled her sister getting sick while her parents weren't home.

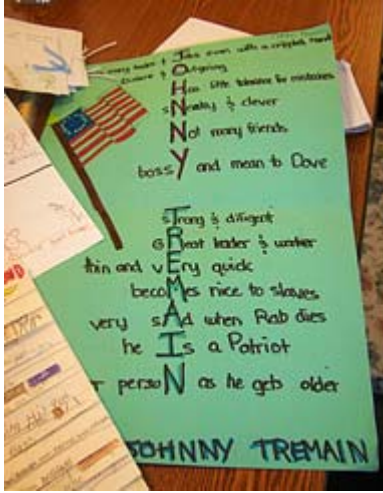
Never mind the book; teacher Alisa Gladstone asks Courtney what she did about her sister. "Instead of screaming my head off, I called my mom and told her to come home, and then we had to go to the hospital," Courtney relates.

This is how Gladstone runs her literature circles at [Blue Ridge Middle School](#), in Purcellville, Virginia. Students meet in small groups based on themes and start talking, with some prompting from Gladstone. If the discussion veers off course, well, that's part of the point: Literature circles are designed to help students connect with the material, whether it's characters in a novel about war or the antics of Amelia Bedelia.

Courtney's personal story was a response to a question: "Did you ever find yourself in a situation in which you had to make an adult decision?" The students were discussing the theme of childhood to maturity in the young-adult war novel *My Brother Sam Is Dead*, talking about how events in the book forced the main character to grow up.

"When they have to tie what they're reading to themselves, it becomes more real to them," Gladstone explains. "The students remember what happened in the book because they are able to relate to it, and it helps them grow."

Literature circles essentially are small group discussions about a book. But they're much more than chatter about the parts students liked (or didn't like) in the novel. Through literature circles, students learn how to think in terms of why, not just what. In Gladstone's class, it's not enough for a student to say that the death of the main character's father affected her. She has to explain *how* it affected her and what that means in relation to the theme they're discussing. The circles also teach interaction, as students take turns talking about and listening to various opinions on the same topic. Afterward, students write reflections and do projects based on the reading.



Name-Dropping:

A sixth-grader created an acrostic poem to illustrate some of the traits of the lead character in *Johnny Tremain* for her literature-circle project.

Credit: Alexandra R. Moses

Teaching the Art of Conversation

Gladstone teaches the same students language arts and history, so she uses the circles to tie the subjects together, and she mixes academic levels. The students choose from one of three books heavy in the historical facts she wants them to know. In this case, they're studying the American Revolution, so she offers up *My Brother Sam Is Dead*, *Johnny Tremain*, and *Fighting Ground*. The students pick a book and then choose from one of five themes: childhood to maturity, friendship and loyalty, war, law, or family.

To talk about the first theme, the eight students involved came to the circle with three relevant facts or quotes from their books. A couple of students chose the statement by the title character from *Johnny Tremain* that he is "a boy in time of peace and a man in time of war." Gladstone asks the group what it means to be a grown-up. "If you get into trouble, you don't just get grounded," Conor answers. "There's no one to tell you what to do."

The conversation veers quite a bit off course after that, as the students break into laughter and someone tells a story about a television commercial they saw recently. Gladstone, who says some amount of social diversion is necessary for their age, gently guides them back on topic by asking a student who hasn't spoken up yet to share her insights.

Gladstone says giving students a choice about which book to read, which theme to discuss, and, later, what type of project to create, gets the more reluctant readers interested in the books, because they can pick one that speaks to them.

The circles have helped improve history test scores, she adds.

"They're able to retain the information a little bit better because they've lived through it with their characters," she states. "On the tests, they'll imagine Johnny Tremain, and they can think through some of those facts and about the people who were there."

The Learning Process

Just how a literature circle looks in practice depends on the students, the teacher, the subject matter, and the curriculum goals. Literature circles in Jennifer McFarland's first-grade class look and sound very different from Gladstone's sixth-grade class. The seven students at [Oakland Terrace Elementary School](#), in Silver Spring, Maryland, just finished reading *Good Work, Amelia Bedelia*, one in a series of popular books about a maid who misunderstands her employer's directions, to comic effect.

McFarland keeps her circles structured -- giving each student a role, such as connection conductor, scene setter, and word sleuth -- to keep her six- and seven-year-olds on track. Only select students with better reading abilities take part.

"They're getting a full learning process," McFarland points out. "Literature circles hit on the main points that you need to read, think, discuss, and then reflect. If they remember those are the four things they need, they're going to excel in every subject and every grade."

McFarland wants her students to learn what it means to be professional, so they have guidelines. To take a turn speaking, students must say what their role is and why they are speaking, and if someone wants to comment, he or she must say "I agree" or "I disagree because . . ."

In [handouts on each role](#), McFarland has prompts to get the students thinking more deeply about the reading. The connection conductor, for instance, needs to bring examples of real-life connections to the story. McFarland notes that getting them to look for additional meaning in what they read for the literature circle also helps them think beyond simple facts in other subjects as well.

"I am the word sleuth, and I would like to go next because I have a lot of words to share," announces Carl. He has brought a list of words with the page they appear on in the book and their definitions. Today's words include *dinner*, *serve*, and *table*. McFarland uses a marker to copy the words and definitions onto an oversized piece of paper. The students briefly discuss his definition of *table* as a place to eat, and they finally agree that the definition isn't specific enough. Later, the students will take a quiz on the words.

McFarland uses the circle to meet her district's writing-curriculum goals on persuasive writing and [letter writing](#). For part of their project, the students must write a persuasive letter to Amelia Bedelia's employers, telling them how to be more specific with their hapless maid. They also write reflection journals about the reading and the discussions.

Though Gladstone and McFarland's methods differ, they share the same goal: to encourage a love of reading. McFarland says the practice of digging deeper into the books teaches her students to stop and think about how they know something to be true.

"I love to see where the children's minds go when they're reading the book," McFarland declares. "They're going into this whole extra level of understanding."

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Creating a Literature Circle: Tips and Links

Teachers who want to try out literature circles need to know one thing -- no two circles look the same.

"It's an approach that's so different in every classroom," says Katherine L. Schlick Noe, an education professor at

Seattle University who has written extensively about literature circles. "So many people use them in different ways."

The keys to success are simplicity and adaptability. And although it might seem that the most logical subjects in which to use literature circles are those heavy in reading, such as language arts, history, and English, they can be used in other subjects. A high school science teacher in North Carolina, for example, uses literature circles to help her students understand complex scientific terms.

Noe advises teachers to give students one thing to think about and put the emphasis on the conversation, starting with a five- or ten-minute discussion. Teachers can set up the circles so that each group meets one at a time, with the teacher sitting in, or so that all the circles meet at once, and the teacher circulates among them.

A common mistake is for teachers to give students too much to do, such as a long list of questions or complicated projects. Their energy then goes into the tasks rather than delving deeply into the books, Noe explains. She suggests students use Post-it notes to mark passages or pages they want to discuss, or write down a quote or a thought as they're reading to prepare them for the circle discussion.

Here are a few tips:

- **Offer students a choice.** Sixth-grade teacher Alisa Gladstone says letting her students pick a book, a theme, and a project gives even the most reluctant reader a vested interest in the material.
- **Don't dominate the discussion.** Part of the fun is seeing where the students go in the circle. Teachers should observe, offer feedback, and gently guide things back on track when necessary, but they should not micromanage.
- **Encourage reflection.** After the students finish their circle, have them write about what they thought of the discussion. For younger students, it can be a few sentences. For older students, it can be a stream-of-consciousness-style journal entry.
- **Assign a project.** Many teachers have their students do projects at the end of the book discussion. This is an especially effective way for the nonverbal students to express themselves, Noe says. Some of Gladstone's students did maps, acrostic poems, and timelines. First-grade teacher Jennifer McFarland's students have done puppet shows, dioramas, and a story quilt.
- **Be aware of common pitfalls.** Students who read too far ahead and give away the ending, students who are unprepared, and discussions that go too far off track can derail a literature circle. McFarland talks to parents at the beginning of the school year about making sure their children don't read beyond the assignment.

To get more information on literature circles and additional tips on getting started, check out these Web resources:

The [Literature Circles Resource Center](#) provides examples from teachers of different methods, resources for doing theme units, and suggestions for how to choose books and projects.

This [video](#) from Carol Morgan School in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, shows a literature circle in action.

Teacher Jennifer McFarland's [classroom Web page](#) includes examples of literature-circle projects.

[LiteratureCircles.com](#) includes reviews of books that work well in literature circles.

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