

LITERATURE CIRCLE INQUIRY

Native–Settler Contact

—Diane Titcher, Murray Lake Elementary, Lowell, Michigan

Diane Titcher teaches fifth grade in Lowell, Michigan. This year, she is trying literature circles for the first time. She has heard from other teachers that they usually assign kids some kind of project—a poster, report, or skit—immediately after their reading and discussion are done. But after attending a weekend workshop with Smokey and Nancy Steineke in Santa Fe, Diane decided instead to engage her kids in extended small-group inquiries into questions raised by their literature circle books.

This meant that as student groups met to discuss sections of their chosen novels, she would help them to notice what they were wondering about, what questions they were developing along the way. By the end of their books, each group would identify one big lingering question or topic of interest, and then launch an investigation of it. This shift from project-style book reports to ambitious inquiries would not just allow kids to explore new ideas that surfaced in their reading, but would also move them beyond a single novel into the whole universe of nonfiction, multiple genres, the Internet, and “people” research.

Building Background Knowledge and Curiosity

Diane tries to correlate her language arts instruction with curriculum themes and with the fifth-grade social studies content, which is taught by a colleague. This year, she knows that her students will be studying American history, and particularly the contact between white settlers and native peoples in different regions across the country. After some initial class discussion, Diane discovers that her kids don’t have much solid information about Native Americans. So, she decides to start by growing her students’ background knowledge with a series of readings about settler–native contact.

Listen to Diane as she takes over in her own words:

After all this knowledge building, the kids were chomping at the bit to pick their books. After careful research, I had selected five titles on settler–native contact at a range of reading levels, from fourth through seventh grade. Lit circles are always a great way to differentiate instruction in the classroom; with five book choices, I can be sure that my developing readers and kids with special needs as well as my avid readers will all be both interested in and able to read their books. These were the five options:

Indian Captive: The Story of Mary Jemison by Lois Lenski. Set in the Midwest and New York in 1758. A fictional account of a true story of a young girl captured and raised by Seneca Indians.

Blood on the River: James Town 1607 by Elisa Carbone. The story of the settlement of the James Town colony as told through the eyes of a young page of Captain John Smith's. Includes both positive and negative images of Native Americans.

Sign of the Beaver by Elizabeth George Speare. Set in 1769 in the Maine wilderness, it tells the story of a young boy who maintains his family's new home on his own, with the help of a Native American boy and his tribe.

Crooked River by Shelley Pearsall. Based on a true story and set in 1812 on the Ohio frontier, it's the story of a thirteen-year-old girl whose father holds an Indian, accused of murder, prisoner in the family's attic until his trial. The girl struggles with her doubts about the "certain" guilt of the Indian and ultimately must decide whether she should go against everyone in her town and try to save the Indian from certain execution.

My Heart Is on the Ground by Ann Rinaldi. Takes place in 1880 at the Carlisle Indian School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, the book is the fictional diary of Nannie Little Rose, a Sioux Indian girl who is sent to the Carlisle Indian School to "cleanse" her of her Indian past and make her more like a white person.

Choosing Books and Forming Groups

We took more than an hour of class time to choose the books. The process included book talks by me, a book pass, and "voting," where each student marked a ballot with his or her top three choices. I assured the kids that they would get one of their top three choices.

On Friday morning, the kids bounded in, desperate to find out whether their book groups had been set up. I read off the book groupings, to a wonderful chorus of exclamations in the background ("Yes!" "All right!"). I had the groups get together in meeting spots scattered around our room. They used the rest of our time on Friday morning to come up with a schedule for their readings and meetings and a set of ground rules for how they would operate as a team.

First Group Meetings

There was definitely an air of excitement in the room as reading time approached, and the kids were anxious to meet in their groups and get going. I wanted to be sure they had a strong foundation for starting their

discussions, so instead of letting them plunge into out-loud discussion, I began by having them do a write-around, or written conversation. I explained that in their “written silent discussion,” they could share any thoughts they had about the book so far. I gave them some options to consider if they weren’t sure where to start. The options included:

Writing about the main character—what was their impression of the character so far?

Writing about the events in the book so far—what did they think about what had happened?

Sharing their predictions about what they thought would happen next and why.

Describing challenges they encountered while reading (thinking about themselves as readers).

They set right to work, and wrote for three to four minutes before I told them to swap their writing. They passed their journals several times. After the final pass, I invited the kids to simply shift into out-loud conversation, continuing the discussion they had begun in writing. A buzz of voices filled the room as kids took up my invitation. I circulated, listening in on conversations and helping groups that needed a little nudge. When I came to the group reading *Crooked River*, I stopped to listen in on their conversation and was reassured by what I heard. I was delighted to hear that they were disagreeing agreeably, a lesson I had taught earlier in the year.

KYLE: I feel sad for the girl. Her dad treats her like a slave, and the girl is thinking about killing herself to be with her mom. So her dad is mean and evil but her mom was nice.

MICHELE: It did not say that the girl was going to kill herself to be with her mom. But it did say she missed her mom and she wanted to be with her. But it did not say that she wanted to kill herself.

HANNAH: Yeah, she didn’t want to die. It said that right in the book. And it didn’t say that her mom was nice, but I know that she is better than her dad. I would be really mad if my dad put a murderer in our house, wouldn’t you? But I don’t think that he is actually a murderer. Why would a dad be so mean to his kids? I think that maybe he is just mad that his wife died. Either that or he needs help (serious help)!

EMILY: Kyle, how do you know her mom was nice? Yeah, I agree with Hannah that her dad needs serious help!

Across all the group, kids were totally into their books, had plenty to talk about, were supporting their comments with excerpts from the text, and were using their social skills well, trying not to interrupt each other. I even felt that I could see kernels of future inquiry questions in the conversation, here on the very first day.

A few days later after kids had read another quarter of their books we held a second round of book club meetings.

Reflecting on Collaboration Skills

Today, I wanted the lit circle groups to reflect on their collaborative process over the first two meetings. I asked them to talk in their groups for a few minutes about what went well and what needed improvement, and then we gathered to list both pluses and minuses. The kids were quick to mention some positives:

“When someone misunderstands something, we can help them.”

“We get to learn the way other people think.”

“Having the question charts helped us focus.”

“We were really ‘into it!’”

“Group members help us understand.”

“It makes the book more fun because you get to know what everybody else thinks about it.”

“The book is less confusing when we share our thinking.”

I had a more difficult time getting them to share even a single negative, until I reminded them that sharing group problems is not the same as “ratting” on your friends. Rather, it is a way to look at things that get in the way of good, productive discussions and figure out how to solve those problems. After hearing that, hands went up with problems—and suggested solutions.

“*People get off task.*” It is the responsibility of everyone in the group to gently remind those who aren’t on task to regain their focus. The first person who notices the problem should always speak up. After that, the consequences in the group’s ground rules should be applied if needed.

“*Someone from another group came over during our first meeting and distracted us.*” The unanimous solution: we should nicely tell that person that we are discussing our book and they should be with their group discussing their book.

"We spent too much time arguing." I asked the kids if they could remember our previous discussion about what to do if group members can't agree. Nick right away said to look in the text for evidence to support your thinking. I told him that was great, but asked again what would happen if their thinking was inferential and they couldn't agree whose inference was "right." Rachael immediately raised her hand and said, "It's OK to agree to disagree, and maybe they'll be able to end their argument after reading more."

"We spent too much time spent trying to figure out one little part of the book." The kids decided that if they thought the part of the book was really important to the overall story, then it was OK to spend a lot of time discussing it. However, if the majority of the group thought that part of the book was not so important, it was probably best to move on, and come back to it later if they found out something that made it more important.

"I didn't get a chance to talk." This was an easy fix; kids quickly realized that if this was a problem in their group, they were forgetting to use the rules of polite discussion that our class regularly follows. They agreed to try to remind each other when the conversations became too dominated by one or two group members.

The best (and most endearing) part of their meetings today was how many kids were "copying" the positive behaviors we discussed during our debriefing. This was exactly what I'd hoped for.

Looking for Big Questions

I began the next day by talking to the whole class, looking for "big issues," and developing a question that each group agreed they wanted to investigate. Then I briefly conferred with each group individually, but still in front of the whole class, thinking that if everyone heard what the other groups were thinking, it might help each group develop its own questions. I asked them what their proposed topics or questions were, probing for their thinking. I invited kids from other groups to join in with suggestions and refinements. Then I turned the groups loose to work, and visited each for a few minutes.

As I coached individual groups, I stressed that they should find a question that was not only of burning interest but also "researchable." They needed to figure out how they could go about researching their question. I suggested they brainstorm terms and phrases they might use to search the Internet. I also encouraged them to think about how they would enlist the help of our librarian as they did research.

After some work time and lively conversations, all the groups finalized their inquiry questions, as follows:

Blood on the River: How did women get the right to vote?

Sign of the Beaver: Where did white men get the idea that Indians were savages?

Crooked River: What causes hatred and prejudice against one certain group of people?

Indian Captive: What were/are the customs and traditions of the Seneca Indians?

My Heart Is on the Ground: What is the history of the Indian schools run by white people, and why did some Indian parents choose to send their kids to these schools?

These questions covered a wide range, from fairly narrow factual questions to broader issues with universal significance. I felt that each of these topics was potentially researchable, and the kids seemed fired up.

I asked kids if they were ready to “divide and conquer.” We had talked about this strategy before, but to refresh their memory, I asked, “What do we mean by divide and conquer?” They responded with comments like these:

“We can make a plan to split up the work.”

“We don’t have to be working together on one Internet search. We can each search for something different.”

“We don’t all have to read everything we find. We can divide up the reading, then tell the rest of our group what we read about.”

Next I asked, “And how can you be sure that everyone knows what their job is?”

“We have to talk it over.”

“We let everybody volunteer for what part they want to do.”

“We have to write down our work plan and give it to you, right?”

They were right on track.

We decided on a plan to correlate the tasks with our schedule. The kids decided to use reading time that afternoon and all the next week to conduct their research and search for answers to their questions. Then, during the following week’s reading time, they planned to work on a way to share their learning and thinking with others, scheduling presentations at the end of that week. This amounted to about seven hours of class time to complete these inquiry projects. Given all this input, I sent kids back to their groups to negotiate jobs and to revise their written work plans and schedules.

Onward to Investigation!

Over the next week, the kids went to work on their questions. They researched on the Internet. They went to the library. They spoke with other people in the field. Each day, I moved around the room, meeting with groups and coaching them through their research. Different issues emerged for each group. Some needed help finding appropriate information, so we talked about narrowing Internet searches or finding the right books in the library. Others needed suggestions about how to find accessible Internet articles, so I pointed them to websites I had researched that had text closer to their grade level. Some needed my support with a social strategy. My role was to help facilitate their inquiry groups in whatever way I could.

Planning to Share the Learning

I always want my kids to “go public” with their learning in some way. For these inquiry projects, I wanted them to move beyond the typical simple book reports that kids can crank out almost without thinking. Having attended an “Assessment Live!” workshop with Nancy Steineke, I was already aware of some more engaging and thoughtful ways for kids to show what they know. Based on her book (Steineke 2009), Nancy had showed us a dozen “paper-free” reporting structures (found poetry, reader’s theater, song parodies, etc.), and I described a number of these alternatives to the kids. They were immediately attracted to the idea of tableaux, a series of frozen scenes based upon carefully crafted captions read aloud by a narrator. Since there was a groundswell for tableaux, I thought we’d better practice them.

Rehearsals and Presentations

After kids completed the research phases, they spent parts of several days scripting and blocking their tableaux. They worked on their presentations, making lists of props and costumes needed, and rehearsed. After all this preparation and rehearsal, showtime arrived.

After a big round of applause, the group took questions from classmates. Landon asked if the girls knew what kinds of diseases the kids at the school died from. Anna mentioned a few different sicknesses, and Kenzie added that the children also died from trances. The kids asked what that meant, and Kenzie explained that some native kids would go into a deep trancelike state, be mistaken for dead, and be buried alive. We were stunned. Then Michelle asked why Indian parents would send their kids to the school if

they didn't want them to go. Kenzie said if parents didn't give up their kids, they were usually forced to send them anyway, often at gunpoint. I added some information about other tactics used by the whites, such as withholding food and resources from reservations where families refused to send their kids. Kenzie also mentioned that some parents sent their children so they could learn to read English—and understand the treaties offered by the white men.

Over the next couple of days, the rest of the groups offered their tableaux, with some great thinking and drama. I was delighted to see the level of thinking, the attentiveness of the audience, and the way in which the kids showed ownership of these books. They really knew—and cared about—what they had read.