

DOINGWHATWORKS



Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Literature Circles in High School

Gateway High School, California • December 2008

Topic: Adolescent Literacy

Practice: Engaging Text Discussion

Highlights

- In her ninth grade Humanities class, Rebecca Wieder leads her students in a literature circles lesson.
- Students discuss *Like Water for Chocolate* in groups of five; each student plays a role (summarizer, discussion director, connector, literary luminary, literary terms expert).
- Wieder describes how she prepares her students to participate in student-led discussions.
- As they discuss texts students develop strategies for reading, hone their ability as discussants, and deepen their understanding of the book.

About the Site

Gateway High School

San Francisco, CA

Demographics

27% White

25% Hispanic
24% Asian
17% Black
7% Other
1% Native American
67% Free or Reduced-Price Lunch
9% English Language Learners

Gateway High School is a charter high school in San Francisco with a focus on “academic excellence through personalized, student-centered learning” (mission statement). Key components of their program include:

- Learning Center
- Reading Support Program
- Schoolwide reading strategy instruction

Gateway staff work collaboratively to help students develop strong reading skills by:

- Engaging staff in schoolwide literacy professional development,
- Using diagnostic testing to identify the specific needs of struggling readers,
- Providing intervention support to struggling readers through an intensive reading support program,
- Providing ongoing support to students through the Learning Center,
- Using strategies schoolwide for promoting reading development such as the use of literature circles and Reciprocal Teaching across grade levels, and
- Holding high expectations for all students to become successful readers

Full Transcript

So my name is Rebecca Wieder, and I teach at Gateway High School, and I teach Humanities 9; Creative Writing, which is tenth to twelfth; and also Honors American Literature. Today was a literature circles day, and so the purpose of literature circles is to give the students a chance to make meaning of the text in a student-led way, in which each student has a role that they play, and the roles cater to different learning styles and strengths. So, students have different ways to show their knowledge and to engage in the text.

Student: It says right here, “She can feel Pedro’s heart pounding against her chest, suddenly the pounding ceases.”

Wieder: The goal of this particular literature circle was to make meaning of the end of the text because they had just finished the book and to kind of pull together some of the big ideas from the book that we’ve been tracking along the way. So, that was kind of the content goal. The process goal for literature circles is to help students become more independent, self-directed learners. We find that when students are not

just kind of receptacles for the learning but are actual agents in the learning that it changes the way they conceive of themselves as learners and changes the way that they engage in class discussion and whatever activities we are doing because they feel that their voice is important.

Wieder to class: We're going to travel back to our last couple literature circles. These were our goals the last two times around, right? Remember we started off, these were our initial goals and then we did okay, right? We had some problems with interruptions, some problems with making sure everyone got to contribute, but then we really made some improvements during our second lit circle, right? So, we ended up with a nine. Now our goal for this lit circle is to do even better. So, what would that look like? Let's come up with some goals, okay? What do we want to see from ourselves and from each other to make this our most successful lit circle? Okay. Chanice?

Student: We could refer more back to the book.

Wieder: Excellent.

Wieder: Literature circles are a structured discussion in which students come prepared to take on a certain role. For example, one student comes in prepared to be the discussion director, and they have prepared questions that will spark debate and discussion. And so that student will take over the discussion when it's their turn and prompt deeper debate amongst his or her peers. And the idea is that each student can showcase his or her knowledge in different ways. And so we're trying to encourage different kinds of learners to engage with the text and to feel confident about making meaning of the text, and to show kids that there are different ways to make meaning of a text.

Student 1: She followed Mama Elena's tradition because she wanted to be, like, her mother's follower in a way. Because since Tita disobeyed and Gertrudis disobeyed, so she wanted to be the one to be like, "Oh, I'm going to do what my mom did."

Student 2: So you're saying she basically, like, looks up to her mom as a role model.

Student 1: Yeah.

Student 2: Because she was the only one who didn't disobey.

Student 3: That's true.

Wieder: Literature circles require a fair amount of preparation because we have multiple goals. We have the goal of having students really discuss big ideas, and that requires helping them ask good questions. And so we do some work around what does it mean to ask a question that will spark debate? What does it mean to ask a question that will get students engaged in discussion, and how do you ask follow up questions to engage more discussion? So, that's one aspect of our preparation. Another aspect is how do you listen in the discussion? How do you stay active even when you are not the one talking? And so we do some work on active listening, what does it look like to be an active listener. And we also do model discussion where six

students discuss in front of the class, and we watch and really focus on positive feedback. What did we see them do with body language to show the other students that they were listening? So, we call that a fishbowl activity. We do that before they ever go into their own circles. So, it helps prepare them for what it's going to be like.

Student 1: So you guys have anything else you want to discuss? Oh, I want to know how Tita died.

Others: She ate the candles.

Student 2: Where does it say she ate the candles?

Student 3: It says it right here.

Student 4: Try eating candles, let's see if you don't die.

Student 1: Let's not eat candles.

Student 3: But why did she eat the candles?

Student 5: Because she didn't want to be left alone. Pedro died, so she went after him.

Student 3: Did John Brown die too?

Others: No.

Wieder: I think *Like Water for Chocolate* is a really compelling text for students because it deals with issues that they are facing as young adults. One of the big themes in the book is how does one resist an unjust rule or unjust ruler, and that's something we talk a lot about. And in adolescence, it's very common to feel oppressed by the various authorities in one's life, and so students really relate to the main character who's being oppressed by the force of her mother. So, that's one reason. The other reason is the romantic aspect. Romance is a big part of adolescence, and students are thinking a lot about their first relationships, and the book is about the main character's first love and first relationship and her struggle to realize that love. And so for a lot of students, that really hits home.

Student: Well, I don't think Tita would have any strength if it hadn't happened, like how she didn't marry Pedro and how Rosaura married Pedro. I think that's what made her strong, having to deal with that. And I think if she was in Rosaura's position and she didn't love Pedro and Rosaura did, and she was supposed to marry Pedro, I think she would have done it because she didn't have that strength to stand up to Mama Elena.

Wieder: So, as much as possible during literature circles, I stay hands-off because I really want students to feel that the energy and the meat of the conversation is coming from them and that my job is just to observe so that I can reflect back to them what I saw at the end of the conversation. And so, unless a conversation has really derailed, I will let them try to get back on task and try to encourage each other to participate. And so I really see my role as one of facilitation in terms of set-up, and then as an observer

during the actual lit circle. Occasionally, I will come into a lit circle to ask follow-up questions, but otherwise I'm really observing and making mental notes that I can then share with the class after.

Wieder: You think she would be better off without either of them? Anyone agree?

Student: No. I don't agree because I think...

Wieder: In some ways, I want them to struggle a little bit in that first lit circle and to then notice this is where we got off track, and this is what we need to work on, and so that really comes from them. And so, I deliberately let go of the reins a little bit, which is a hard thing for a teacher to do, but I think reaps rewards in terms of the of the students' self monitoring and ability to feel like they really are in charge. I'm not just saying they are in charge; they really are in charge.