

## Student-Led Literature Circles in an Interdisciplinary High School Classroom

Erin Jensen, Rock University High School, erinjensen@janesville.k12.wi.us

*Abstract:* This essay looks at reading in a high school interdisciplinary English/Social Studies classroom, focusing on student book choice to help inspire, engage, and get students to read.

---

We all know that it can be difficult to inspire students to read. More than ever, they need a particular set of questions answered before they face the task: Why should I? How does this help me? How does this apply to me? Is it worth it? These questions are difficult to answer:

Student: “Why should I read this?”

Teacher: “It’s a wonderful book, and it checks the boxes of state and national English standards!”

Student: “How does this help me?”

Teacher: “You’re reading! The mind is a muscle that needs to be exercised, so your mind will function better if you read. PLEASE READ!”

Student “How does this apply to me?”

Teacher: “Well, the character’s a kid, you were once a kid, and he’s going through this life-changing moment. But I want *you* to find a connection to the story, find what it means to you.”

Student: “Is it worth it?”

Teacher: “Of course it is, but I want *you* to determine that worth.”

Students *do* read. However, their daily reading often consists of skimming social media, picking and choosing what posts and articles to dive into. [Fun fact: If you were born starting around 1982, then social media platforms were most likely a significant part of your adolescence, starting with electronic bulletin board systems migrating to the Internet by way of Compuserve and AOL in the mid-1990s (Fuchs, 2014)]. Despite all this reading, high school students who regularly spend time on social media also earn lower reading scores than those who do not (Posso, 2016). According to Wisconsin Literacy, Inc. (2018), 1.5 million adults in the state qualify for literacy services. For students enrolled in public schools, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2017) focuses on ACT Reading Scores when assessing literacy levels, currently averaging at 19.2, which is below the 20.1 national level. According to the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (2018), a true study focusing on literacy in Wisconsin was last conducted more than a decade ago, in 2003. The “below average” numbers and minimal research into literacy mean that educators cannot simply be passive about the number of students who shun assigned readings.

So, how do we inspire them to read more than just social media posts? There has yet to be a map showing us the right path to take, but I have found that allowing students more choice when it comes to assigned reading is a step in the right direction.

Student choice is not new. Allowing them to determine how to present evidence of their learning has been encouraged over the last few years (Patall, Cooper, & Wynn, 2010). However, the push for this individualized approach has not been felt in the area of reading, for assessing ability and comprehension allows for little creativity. Reading, although a complex cognitive process, has become an involuntary activity of recognizing symbols and determining their meaning and, in school, repeating that rote exercise via a series of questions (Gallagher, 2009). As students learn to read, there is an excitement

of acquiring a new skill, but as they continue to read, it becomes a task or chore. To get that excitement back, we need to give them more say in what they read and how they show us that they did.

Rock University High School (RUHS) caters to students who want a smaller environment to harness their postsecondary futures through interdisciplinary, subject-integrated classrooms in school and practical applicability outside of school. Also, as a charter school housed in a technical college, reading literature, though happens to be a point of contention: “I’m going to be a nuclear technician, so why do I have to read *Catch-22*.” Therefore, within my interdisciplinary Social Studies and English courses, I’m honest and say that literature doesn’t seem to fit neatly on their career paths, but the themes within the book and skills used to understand the book do fit. My first semester teaching this course taught me quite a bit about student engagement and success in the units tied to novels: both engagement and success decrease. Before the second semester, I decided that I would do some research to find more books that fit the literature and English standards, since we read three to four novels plus supplemental materials through the year. After locating these titles, I would have students vote on which most interested them. In some cases, I used their responses to schedule books for the semester or to pick literature circle groups (Daniels, 2002). Surprise! Although this “majority rule” method still made some students feel less than elated with the final selection, the second semester went much more smoothly than the first.

The most successful reading unit involved literature circles focusing on both fiction and non-fiction texts contextualizing World War II. Although it is important to find an array of books that meet district, state, and national standards, this is where I still have some control. I selected five books: Hillenbrand’s *Unbroken*, Zusak’s *The Book Thief*, Spiegelman’s *Maus*, Heller’s *Catch-22*, and Knowles’ *A Separate Peace*. Of course, funding for that many sets can get expensive; however, because literature circles should not include more than six students, I needed fewer copies (Daniels, 2002).

First, I asked the students to rank the books on a scale of 1 (most likely to read) to five (least likely to read) based solely on description because many may otherwise opt for

only one specific book or because a particular book may be too simple or difficult for some without their realizing it. Knowing second and third choices allows me to please everyone as best as I can.

After the students rated the books, I grouped them into literature circles (essentially, the survey groups them, I simply share the results). If we have an overwhelming number in one particular group, I ask students if they would mind reading their second or third choice.

Next, I made a timeline establishing deadlines for readings and journal assignments based on their role: connector, artist, discussion director, literary luminary, and researcher. Each student in the group is to play each role once in order to branch out and try new ways of connecting to the novel.

I usually keep reading journals prompts open ended. I want them to write their reactions, their questions, their predictions, and their connections, and I try to remind them to record page numbers in each entry in order to help with literary analysis later. At the bottom of the journal entry, there are interpretive *big* questions for them to think about as they read, focusing on major events, characters, and authorial choice. They can refer to these questions in their journals, but they're not required to answer them independently. Instead, the questions are to be completed when they meet with their groups (see Appendix B for the timeline and prompts specific to *The Book Thief*).

When the literature circles come together, they are to discuss their role, share their journal entries, and try to answer some of the *big* questions. Since my class is an interdisciplinary, dual credit course, the readings go along with a historical theme. This unit focuses on Total War, which covers the many conflicts involving the United States, specifically those historically know as wars: Revolutionary, Civil, World Wars, Vietnam, and the current War on Terror. This course does not have a text book, so students use a multitude of different online resources. Primary sources were mostly retrieved from the [Presidential Libraries](#) and the [Library of Congress](#) databases. Secondary and tertiary sources come from BadgerLink Explora, Britannica online, and media resources such as

the BBC, CNN, and the *New York Times*. From defining what conflict and war are, to reading perspectives from both the anti- and pro-war movements, students get a better understanding of why conflicts and wars happen and their significance in United States history. Sequencing should allow one to two class periods or fifty minutes a week on literature circles, while the rest of the week should focus on target objectives.

Toward the end of the novels, I introduce the final project, which includes both a literary analysis based on the *big* questions and a creative element to be completed independently (see Appendix B). This individual work places all accountability on each student and reinforces the objective that each student must make connections and interpretations autonomously.

This unit had one of my highest success rates with over 90% of the class completing their literature circle work, journals, and both portions of the project, so I applied this strategy to other lessons as well. Allowing students to choose the books also invalidated the excuse “I didn’t want to read that book anyway.” Yes, students could potentially change this excuse into “I realized that I did not really like the book”; nevertheless, there was a bit more accountability on the students’ part. Choice empowered many to read and do the work.

Again, literature circles are not new, but at RUHS, where we are trying to help students forge a career path, we need to find ways to show them how reading fits in. Literature circles focus on active reading and on the skills and the collaboration needed to understand what is being read. They strengthen their written communication skills and they get to express themselves creatively. I believe literature circles are effective ways to empower students to read.

Students can read, and students want to read, but it is crucial that we find ways to inspire them. Choice answers their prerequisite questions. Choice engages. Choice holds students accountable, and choice gets them reading.

## References

- ACT data and results. (2017). Retrieved April 24, 2018, from <https://dpi.wi.gov/assessment/ACT/data/act>
- Daniels, H. (2002). *Literature circles: Voice and choice in book clubs and reading groups*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
- Fuchs, C. (2014). *Social media: A critical introduction*. London: Sage.
- Gallagher, K. (2009). *Readicide: How schools are killing reading and what you can do about it*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
- Literacy statistics. (2018). Retrieved April 24, 2018, from [http://wisconsinliteracy.org/find\\_literacy\\_program/statistics.html](http://wisconsinliteracy.org/find_literacy_program/statistics.html)
- Posso, A. (2016). Internet usage and educational outcomes among 15-year-old Australian students. *International Journal of Communication*, 10, 3851-3876. Retrieved from Communication & Mass Media Complete database. (Accession No. 127361840)
- Patall, E. A., Cooper, H., & Wynn, S. R. (2010). The effectiveness and relative importance of choice in the classroom. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 102(4), 896-915. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0019545>
- What is NAAL? (n.d.). Retrieved April 24, 2018, from National Assessment of Adult Literacy website: <https://nces.ed.gov/naal/>

## Appendix A. *The Book Thief* Timeline and Journal Prompts

As you read, you will be responsible for thoughtfully keeping a journal and answering discussion questions.

|                    |                                |         |           |
|--------------------|--------------------------------|---------|-----------|
| May 11             | Introduction                   |         |           |
| DUE DATE           | Part/Chapter                   | Pages   | Journals  |
| May 12             | Prologue, Part One & Part Two  | 1-122   | 2 Entries |
| <b>May 17</b>      | Part Three & Four              | 123-170 | 2 Entries |
| May 18             | Part Five                      | 239-303 | 1 Entry   |
| May 19             | Part Six                       | 305-350 | 1 Entry   |
| <b>May 24</b>      | Part Seven & Eight             | 351-455 | 2 Entries |
| May 25             | Part Nine, Ten, & Epilogue     | 457-550 | 3 Entries |
| May 26 (no school) |                                |         |           |
| May 31st           | Final Group Project Completion |         |           |

**Big Questions** (by the end of the book you will be able to answer these questions thoughtfully):

1. What was the author's purpose for choosing Death as a narrator? Is this a trustworthy narrator? How does Death see what a human narrator might not?
2. Knowing that Liesel is called a "thief," how does the book complicate our ideas of justice and judgment? Which characters do you view as just or unjust or as brave or cowardly, and why? Which events or details most color your perceptions of these characters?
3. What choices do characters make about groups they will belong to? What groups do they belong to without choice? What are the consequences?
4. Discuss Liesel's friendship with Rudy. Does she love him in the way he loves her, or is it a child's love? Do you think he reminds her of her brother?
5. Zusak's books often portray characters with a tendency to fight—including Max and Liesel. Is a child who fights more forgivable than an adult who fights? Why?
6. From Hans to Liesel to the mayor's wife, discuss how some of the characters in *The Book Thief* deal with their past. Discuss themes of memory and punishment.
7. Is Hans Hubermann courageous? How does he show courage, or lack of courage?
8. Name some acts of resistance in the book, from large to small. What does the author intend by including these acts?
9. Who has power in this book? How does Liesel gain power, and how does Max? Toward the end of the novel, Liesel remarks that words give power. How so?
10. Discuss the meaning of Max painting over *Mein Kampf*. What is he able to express through this action that he cannot convey in person?

**Daily Chapter Assignments.** For every chapter assignment you will pose three discussion questions and write journal entries.

Questions: All questions need to be open ended (unless you have a follow-up question or would like an explanation). These questions are to be discussed in your lit circle, and you are to write down your and your peers' answers.

Journal Entries: The following are examples of journal entries (try to mix it up every entry!) Journals do not need to be shared with lit circles:

1. Write thoughts that are going through your head as you read the novel.
2. Note times when your reading changes:
  - a. You see something you didn't see before.
  - b. You recognize a pattern--the images start to overlap, gestures or phrases recur, some details seem associated with each other.
  - c. The story seems to be about something different from what you thought.
  - d. You discover that you were misreading.
  - e. You realize that the writer has introduced a new context or new perspective.
  - f. You see new vocabulary, especially new words repeated throughout (the Merriam-Webster app is very useful, and its voice search feature handy).
3. Note times when you are surprised or puzzled:
  - a. Something just doesn't fit.
  - b. Things don't make sense—pose explicitly the question or problem that occurs to you.
4. Note details that seem important and that make you look again.

5. Note times when you relate to a character. What is relatable, what do you two share, how are you different?
6. Note ways in which the story makes you speculate about real life or a connection to another text or even another academic discipline.
7. Note your first impression of the ending--what "ended"? (How many times have you read a short story or a novel only to find yourself really confused about the ending?)
8. Note rhetorical/stylistic devices (diction, syntax, figurative language, tone, imagery) that you recognize--how do they contribute to your reading of the text?
9. Check for hyperbole, such as when is a character (or the author) is exaggerating or over-reacting. What makes it hyperbolic? How would you have written that passage?
10. What is the relationship of a sentence, passage, or chapter to the entire reading?
11. What is the function of the passages that don't carry plot function?
12. Make a claim about a chapter. Support it with details.
13. As part of re-reading, what is the function of a chapter to the whole novel?
14. Find several details in a passage and explain their functions.
15. Explain where you feel the author has used symbolism.
16. How would you draw (or re-draw) a scene that you thought was interesting or would be better illustrated?
17. Find some complexities in a passage and explain their functions.
18. Activity for Integrated Citation: "Says/Does Analysis"

Short Quote → What does it mean? → What is its function or purpose?

## **Appendix B. Final Creative Project**

You will create a project that demonstrates your engagement with and understanding of the text. Productive projects combine imagination and intellect and are multi-faceted and multi-layered. They are serious and academic as well as creative and inventive and should be viewed as a chance to demonstrate the final product of all your classroom and individual efforts.

Your presentation should demonstrate critical reflection on and interpretation of your chosen novel. You might consider exploring a theme, image, or character, or you might think about the effect of some literary aspect of the novel. Whatever you choose, you should be able to articulate a meaningful connection between your project and the book. Be creative and express your own unique point of view!

### Some Ideas

*Art.* Painting, Sculpture, Drawing, Mixed Media

*Music or Drama Composition.* CD compilation, musical/song performance, mini opera or musical play or sketch performance, create costumes and dress as you think the characters in your novel did

*Web.* Podcast, website, blog, interactive map (flash)

*Creative Writing.* Poetry collection, travel diary, or reading journal children's book graphic novel/comic

*Academic Writing.* Speech, essay, print journalism, interview magazine article newspaper, travel guide, yearbook

*Broadcast Journalism.* Investigative interview or profile, news broadcast, movies, tv, radio or tv talk show, scene from a film or radio program

*Other.* Recreate a battle or scene, diaspora project, illustrated family tree puzzle, diagram research project

Project Proposal Due May 19

1. Book Title
2. Group (name group members) or Individual Project?
3. Type of Project
4. Project Title
5. Project abstract (50-100 word description of the project and how it relates to your lit circle book)
6. If you have a group/partnership, *who will do what?* Describe the role each group member will play.