

Book Clubs in Developmental Reading: Building Reading Comprehension, Fostering Reading Enjoyment, and Engaging Students

The use of book clubs in college developmental reading classes is an effective way to encourage reluctant readers to build and strengthen reading skills, foster reading enjoyment, and engage students. In addition, book clubs build a sense of community within the classroom as the students converse and share their interpretations of the reading material in a non-threatening environment. This article describes how to set up book clubs in the developmental reading classroom as well as how to facilitate their use to motivate students to read.

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“Mrs. M, thank you for this class. At first I did not want to be in this class. I felt like this was going to be a complete waste of my time. I liked getting together with my group and talking about our book. I have never read a book before this class and it was fun.”

--Student Comment Provided on Course Evaluation

In 2011 the ACT college admission test reported that only one out of four college-bound high school graduates was adequately prepared for college-level courses. Of those graduates, 52% of them passed the reading benchmarks provided by the testing organization. Students who do not have strong critical reading skills usually do not perform well on the placement assessments used to measure their ability to perform in college-level courses. Those

students are usually placed in developmental, or remedial, courses to help them strengthen their skills. Developmental courses, however, do not always count towards degree requirements and are often viewed as a roadblock by students.

However, developmental reading courses are often “gatekeeper” courses that must be passed as a prerequisite to other “college-level” courses, and students enrolled in these courses do benefit. Research indicates that those students who pass the required remedial reading course experience greater success in college over the long term (Cox et al., 2003, p. 189). Therefore, students who are given the chance to take developmental classes should be encouraged to stay in the course. It is also important for developmental reading course instructors to provide opportunities for students to become strategic readers and motivated to read (Nist & Simpson, 2000). Reading and education go hand-in-hand (Chall, 1996), with those individuals who read for pleasure having higher literacy ability (Atwell, 2006). Therefore, reading for pleasure, although not often emphasized in developmental reading courses, should be promoted to students as a way to increase literacy skills.

As a reading specialist and developmental reading teacher, I have encountered my share of students who come to class upset and discouraged because they are required to take another reading course. I have also had my share of students unmotivated to read. One strategy that can be used to facilitate learning and engage students in developmental reading courses is book clubs. Because many developmental students are not confident in their ability, they often do not feel comfortable with participation in discussion; thus, they feel uneasy when asked to talk about a book. However, when book clubs are incorporated into courses, especially developmental reading courses, students are given the opportunity to gain experience on how to discuss books, relate the material to their lives, make connections with other students in their classrooms and, possibly, discover the joys of reading for pleasure.

Theoretical Framework

Skilled readers self-regulate their reading (Paris & Myers,

1981). Good readers are able to automatically decode the text and use a variety of comprehension strategies to help them understand what the author is trying to convey. When good readers experience a breakdown in comprehension, they have the tools to fix the problem. This process of self-supervision is called metacognition.

Struggling readers need to be taught how to develop their repertoire of skills as well as how to employ them when they encounter a breakdown in their comprehension. Research has shown that when developmental readers are taught strategies that focus on cognitive and metacognitive processing, their reading comprehension improves (Simpson & Nist, 2000).

Instructors of developmental reading students should provide opportunities to enhance and practice the development of metacognitive skills through a supportive and nurturing environment. In addition, students should be given assignments that provide guidance and practice in developing metacognitive skills while building self-confidence (Vacca, 2002), and for students to become aware of metacognitive strategies, instructors must use effective instructional methods and materials (Paris & Paris, 2001). One such strategy is book clubs.

What are Book Clubs?

In Harvey Daniels’ book *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups* (2002), Daniels explains that literature circles, or book clubs, are small temporary groups of students who work together to select a book to read, prepare for discussion individually, and then discuss what they have read. In the classroom setting, teachers serve as the facilitators of the book clubs, thus allowing for the students to take ownership of their roles in the learning community.

When I was first introduced to the idea of book clubs, I was a reading specialist at an elementary school. Immediately, I was drawn to the idea of encouraging students to guide and monitor their own learning. During the book club sessions, the students run the book club meetings; thus they select the text to read, determine the schedule for the book club role preparation, and

prepare individually for the discussion. This process gives all book club members a sense of accountability as they share their own ideas. When I first took this strategy into my developmental reading classrooms, it was greeted by some students with hesitation at first, but was embraced by most by the end of the semester - so much so that several students continued their book clubs after the semester had ended.

Book Club Group Formation and Book Walk

One of the first steps for setting up book clubs in the classroom is group formation. Book clubs are student-driven, so students are encouraged to form groups according to their interests. From the first day of class, I encourage group work so that students get the opportunity to work with their classmates. By the end of the first three weeks, students in my classes have participated in several cooperative learning activities. As a result, the students are prepared for working collaboratively in a book club setting.

Once the students are prepared to work in small groups, and I have an idea of the students' interests, I arrange a time for them to explore and select the reading materials for their book club. From the public and campus libraries, I bring in at least fifteen to twenty books representing a variety of genres. This activity is called a book walk. During the walk, students are given the opportunity to briefly examine possible selections for their book club. I do a short talk over each book which includes a brief description of the book and author. Group members are then invited to visit each station and document their findings on the Book Walk Form, which is provided below. At the end of the class period, students are given time to peruse the books, discuss possible selections, and are encouraged to reach a group consensus for their book selection. Once the book has been selected, each book club member is required to locate the book to bring to class by the next book club meeting. Students are given the option to purchase the book or check out the book from the library. On that day, I also have applications for public library cards available, and we discuss how to locate books on the online catalog system.

Book Walk

BOOK TITLE	AUTHOR	COMMENTS

Preparing for Book Club Roles

In order to facilitate the book club roles, I provide each group member one copy of the Book Club Role Sheets, which are included at the end of this article. All of these forms are based on the materials presented by Daniels (2002). Participant roles include Passage Selector, Discussion Leader, Summarizer, Illustrator, Researcher/Connector, and Vocabulary Finder.

- The Passage Selector chooses important passages from the reading assignment and explains their importance.
- The Discussion Leader develops questions that will stimulate discussion within the group and ensures that each member of the group is given the opportunity to participate in the conversation.
- The Summarizer begins each meeting with a statement that includes the main idea and key points of the reading assignment.
- The Illustrator prepares a drawing or photo of important events related to the reading assignment.
- The Researcher/Connector conducts research on background information on the author, or historical period of the book.
- The Vocabulary Finder selects terms from the reading assignment to discuss with the group.

In order to better provide students an idea of what will be expected of them, I model how to prepare for each role using a short piece of text. This "think-aloud" process gives students an example of how they should conduct their preparation. Each student is required to serve in each role at least once during the

book club experience, thus giving everyone the opportunity to practice and build each of the skills promoted through the role process. It has been my experience that when I require students to locate and learn new vocabulary through the readings, create higher-level discussion questions, summarize the text, or prepare a visual that represents an aspect of the text, students are more likely to become engaged in the reading process. Finally, groups are asked to create a timeline of the book chapters and the dates they will discuss each chapter.

Individual Reflection and Final Presentation

After each book club meeting, students are asked to reflect on their preparation and participation. Once students have reflected on those qualities that help them be a good participant, they understand the importance of coming to each meeting fully prepared. Many times, students have come to class unprepared and have told the other group members that they are unable to participate. Usually, their reflections indicate that they realize the importance of preparation to the book club process because they enjoy participation in the group discussion. Reflection holds students accountable for their own learning and provides the opportunity to document progress.

At the conclusion of the book club sessions, each group is asked to prepare a short presentation for the class. This presentation serves as an “advertisement” for their book to the other members of the class. Not many parameters are given for this assignment; however, I do provide examples from prior classes and require that students present as a group. Past presentations have included everything from Power Point presentations to character dinners. The presentations are always one of the highlights of the book clubs.

Discussion

At the end of each semester, students are asked to provide feedback on those components of the course that were beneficial to them. Of course, some student comments include an explanation that the book clubs involved too much work for them or that they “hate” to read and do not enjoy participation in discussion with

other individuals. However, most of the student feedback tells me that it is a worthwhile classroom activity. The student comment at the beginning of this article is just one of the many positive comments that I have received on student evaluations. Two more comments that follow are representative:

The best part of this class was learning to be the discussion leader, summarizer, vocabulary and illustrator for a book club. I will use this skill in my other classes!

I found that the book club facilitates the act of learning in different ways and that because when we share and work with group this method helps to understand some aspects of learning better than others. In my opinion the book club increase the student learning because this kind of activities make the students think critically and make them connect with the real life. [Comment by a student learning English as a second language]

Conclusion

The National Endowment for the Arts released a report entitled *To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence* (2007), which focused on reading for pleasure. It is not surprising that nearly half of all young adults surveyed do not read for pleasure. As developmental reading course instructors look for strategies to help their student prepare for college-level coursework, book clubs should be considered as an effective instructional tool. From my experience, book clubs have provided a structure in which reading comprehension skills can be strengthened, reading enjoyment can be promoted, and active student engagement can be achieved in a non-threatening manner. Personal experience has confirmed the benefit of employing book clubs in my classroom.

Name:**Date:****Book:****Pages Read:****Passage Selector**

Find and record at least six especially important passages from the reading assignment. Select passages for many different reasons (the writing is particularly beautiful or has powerful language; it is funny; it is a turning point in the plot; it reveals how a character really thinks; it captures the theme of the reading).

Use the following chart to record your passages. At the meeting, you will read your selected passages out loud to your group. Be prepared to explain why you chose them and inquire about the other members' ideas about them.

PAGE AND PARAGRAPH	THE PASSAGE	REASON FOR SELECTION

Name:**Date:****Book:****Pages Read:****Discussion Leader**

Develop at least six discussion questions (NOT short answer or yes/no questions) that will stimulate discussion in your group. To write good questions, try answering your questions yourself. Is there a correct answer? If there is, then it is not a good discussion question. To answer the question, do you have to think and organize your thoughts? If so, then it is a good discussion question. Use a separate piece of paper if necessary.

Discussion questions:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

Sample questions:

Why do you think the author...?

What is/are the central theme(s) of the book so far?
Why do you think so?

Did you find anything disturbing about ___? Why?

What questions did you have about ___?

Remember: Apply your questions to the assigned portion of the book.

Name:**Date:****Book:****Pages Read:****Summarizer**

Summarize the reading for today's meeting. The group discussion will start with your statement, covering the main ideas and/or key points of today's reading assignment. Write your summary, list the key points and be prepared to read them to the group.

Summary:

Key Points:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Name:**Date:****Book:****Pages Read:****Illustrator**

Illustrate three important events or ideas in the reading assignment by drawing and/or finding a photo or other image that relates to it. You can make a sketch, diagram, flowchart, or even stick figures. Do research on the Internet to find a photo, drawing, or other type of illustration. Be sure to give credit to the source of your illustration. Bring your illustrations to share with your group. Be prepared to explain how your illustrations relate to the reading.

Name:**Date:****Book:****Pages Read:****Researcher/Connector**

Research background information on the author and other relevant information such as the historical period dealt with in the book, the geographical location, or some of the issues or events in the book. You may do your research from the Internet, but don't just download information. Instead, choose information to share that will be helpful for understanding the book. Record the information below and record where the information came from (the name of the website or the book title and author). Finally, make connections between the reading assignment and what you already know (your life experiences, other books you are familiar with, or other events and issues).

Name:**Date:****Book:****Pages Read:****Vocabulary Finder**

Choose at least five terms, or vocabulary words, from the reading assignment to discuss with your group. You can select words that are particularly interesting, appear often, or are not familiar to you but seem important. Use the chart below to record your words, where you found them in the book, and why you chose them. Write down the definition that is most appropriate for the context.

Word	Page Number	Definition and/or why you selected it

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