

READING CIRCLES FOR THE ONLINE CLASSROOM

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INTRODUCTION

Trying to encourage students to pick up a book and enjoy reading is, as any teacher knows, extremely difficult. While students can be assigned reading homework and be lectured endlessly on the benefits of reading and the different skills which they can develop, the enjoyment of reading is something which teachers cannot teach. In past reading classes, I have tried different approaches, which have included students choosing their own reading material, mini presentations, and giving the students semester long reading goals which they are free to complete at their own pace. Inevitably, I found that while some students will be proactive, others will avoid reading until a deadline looms, and then only to finish the task. These students do not engage with the text or give themselves the opportunity to explore it in any depth. However, in my last two years of teaching reading, I have received positive feedback from my students regarding the relaxed atmosphere that included music, team quizzes, and communicative activities.

As our classrooms moved online, I was not optimistic about the prospect of using digital books in my weekly reading class on Zoom, which would undoubtedly change the atmosphere that I had created in past years. On Zoom, breakout rooms posed a problem for my usual reading class set up as it meant students would be isolated from those outside of their rooms, playing music would become an unnecessary challenge given the technical problems students already faced with online learning, and team quizzes using the software I had used in the past were impossible. That said, in my weekly reading classes, I have found a way to create a positive reading atmosphere whilst encourage learner engagement and active contributions to discussions as we read. Positively, the students also appear to enjoy these tasks.

Every few weeks, I assign the class a digital graded reader book from our university's library, which we all read at the same pace. Before the students start reading, they are put into a reading group with ideally six students per group and introduced to the concept of reading circles and reading roles. These reading roles are from the Bookworms Club Reading Circles Teacher's Handbook (Furr, 2011), which use the idea of reading roles and reading circles to help facilitate discussion. The six different roles are: Discussion Leader, Summariser, Word Master, Culture Connector, Passage Person, and Connector. The students are given detailed information on the responsibilities of each role, what the focus of each role is, and what they will be expected to bring to their group's discussion. Each group is responsible for how the roles are designated, with the idea that group members try a new reading role each week.

The following reading roles are adapted from the Bookworms Club Reading Circles Teacher's Handbook (Furr, 2011):

- **Discussion Leader:** Prepares five general questions about the story or chapters read that week, to ask the group. Leads and guides the discussion

by making sure that each group member participates and presents their prepared information.

- **Summariser:** Makes notes on the main events that took place, the characters, and a brief summary of the story or chapters, in their own words.
- **Word Master:** Finds five words which are important to the story and provides an explanation of their importance and reason for inclusion. Depending on the size of the group this may be a shared role, with each group member contributing.
- **Culture Connector:** Identifies cultural similarities or differences found in the story and the student's own country and culture. Prepares four questions relating to the culture found in the story to ask the group.
- **Passage Person:** Makes notes on three important passages found in the assigned story or chapter and explains why these chapters are central to the story. They also prepare a question relating to each passage to ask the group.
- **Connector:** Makes five connections between the story and their own real-life experiences or observations. They may also prepare questions to ask the group to share their own experiences.

To encourage accountability, and collaboration within each group, I assign a Google Document for each member to add their reading role notes (see Appendix A). The document is set up to include brief descriptions of each role, the narrative arc, themes in the story, and a guided space for each group member to add their notes for each week, the class reads the book. For every new digital book read in class, the group members are changed and a new document is assigned. The document is shared with the teacher and each group member, which allows them to collaborate by using each other's input to complete their own portion of the task. For synchronous class time on Zoom, having a shared document makes it easier for the group to have their discussion and follow the content in breakout rooms, as each Discussion Leader is asked to share their screen whilst showing this document. As the group holds their discussion, they are also able to make and see edits to their notes in real time. The teacher visiting each breakout room can easily follow the group's discussion, and ask for the students to elaborate on their ideas where necessary.

To encourage further discussion and exploration of the stories we read and their themes, after each reading group has finished sharing their weekly notes, I often add additional discussion questions to each group's chat box, that are related to the themes of the story for the group leader. I ask the leaders to choose questions which they are interested in, and to lead the discussions, which gives them additional chance to practice their leadership skills and guiding discussions. These discussions as a group demonstrate to the students that when we read in class, we are not focusing on one skill but instead multiple skills that they do not associate with reading, for example, listening, being able to hold a conversation, expanding on ideas, etc. It also reminds them that reading can also be a social activity and one which they can do with others, whether it be a book we read in class or a text that they have been given as homework.

By utilising these reading roles, each student is able to contribute to the discussion in a different way and feel like they are an important part of the group. The students have the

opportunity to experience different roles with different reading focuses which helps them to develop their reading and note taking skills. As classes often have students with different reading abilities, giving students the opportunity to prepare their notes and contributions ahead of time has been an advantage. Quieter students, who may usually prefer to take a backseat and allow their more confident peers to answer questions and lead discussions, are given the chance to take on more active roles with the support of their peers. The inclusion of reading circles and reading roles in the online weekly reading classes has been a positive experience, as the students actively engage with the different digital books all while supporting each other as they discover the stories together.

REFERENCES

Furr, M. (Ed.). (2011). *Bookworms club reading circles teacher's handbook* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.

APPENDIX A

Example of a Reading Circle Group Document

(Adapted from *Oxford Bookworms Club Reading Circle Teacher's Handbook*. This is not an official adaptation, nor has this been endorsed in any way by Oxford University Press.)

Each week, you should decide as a group who will have which role (you should try to experience each role at least once). It will then be your responsibility to add notes relevant to your role. These will be used in your circle discussions.

Role explanation

Each group should have one member take the role of each of the following. If you do not have 6 members, then the role of Word Master should be shared by your group so that you add one word to the table.

| | |
|-------------------|--|
| Discussion leader | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Read the story (or chapters) twice and prepare at least 5 general questions• Start the reading circle discussion by asking one or two of your questions• Make sure everyone has a chance to speak and joins the discussion• Call on each member to present a summary of their prepared information• Guide the discussion |
| Summariser | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Read the story (or chapters) and make notes about the characters, events, and ideas• Find the key points that everyone needs to know to understand and remember the story• Retell the story in a short summary (one or two minutes), in your own words |
| *Word master | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Read the story (or chapters), and look for words or short phrases that are new or difficult to understand, or that are important to the story• Choose five words that you think are important for the story• Explain the meanings of these five words in simple English• Tell the group why these words are important for understanding the story |
| Connector | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Read the story (or chapters) twice and look between the story and the real world• Make notes about at least two possible connections to your own experiences, or to the experiences of friends and family, or to real-life events• Tell the group about your personal connections and ask for their comments or questions• Ask the group if they can think of any of their own personal connections with the passages |

| | |
|-------------------|--|
| Passage person | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read the story (or chapters), and find important, interesting, or difficult passages • Make notes about at least three passages that are important for the plot, or that explain the characters, or that have very interesting or powerful language • Read each passage to the group, or ask another member to read it • Ask the group one of two questions about the passage |
| Culture collector | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read the story (or chapters), and look for both differences and similarities between your own culture and the culture found in the story • Make notes about two or three passages that show these cultural points • Read each passage to the group, or ask another member to read it • Ask the group some questions about the passage, and any other cultural points in the story |

Themes

What is the story about? There may be more than one theme.

The narrative arc



| Part of the narrative arc | What happened? |
|---------------------------|----------------|
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |

Week 1: Discussion leader

Story:

Chapters:

Name:

| | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Question 1 | |
| 2 | |
| 3 | |
| 4 | |
| 5 | |

Summariser

Story:

Chapters:

Name:

| |
|--------------------|
| Main events |
| |
| Characters |
| |

| |
|-------------------|
| My summary |
| |

Word master

Story:

Chapters:

Name:

| Word | Meaning | Reason for choosing the word |
|----------------|----------------|-------------------------------------|
| Page: Line: | | |
| Page: Line: | | |
| Page: Line: | | |
| Page: Line: | | |
| Page: | | |

| | | |
|-------|--|--|
| Line: | | |
|-------|--|--|

Connector

Story:

Chapters:

Name:

| Connection 1 (add more rows if needed) | |
|--|--|
| 2 | |
| 3 | |
| 4 | |
| 5 | |

Passage person

Story:

Chapters:

Name:

| Page: Lines: | Reasons for choosing | Questions about the passage |
|-----------------|----------------------|-----------------------------|
| | | |

| Page: Lines: | Reasons for choosing | Questions about the passage |
|-----------------|----------------------|-----------------------------|
| | | |

| Page: Lines: | Reasons for choosing | Questions about the passage |
|-----------------|----------------------|-----------------------------|
| | | |

Culture collector

Story:

Chapters:

Name:

| Page: | Differences and similarities |
|-------|------------------------------|
| | |

| | |
|---------------|--|
| Lines: | |
|---------------|--|

| | |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Page: Lines: | Differences and similarities |
| | |

| | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Question 1 | |
| 2 | |
| 3 | |
| 4 | |