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Introduction

Many teachers across the United States and around the globe use Literature Circles (LCs) as a non-traditional teaching method. The primary goal of LCs is to promote life-long reading habits among students. A variation of LCs are widely used in elementary classrooms; usually referred to as “reading groups.” In most elementary settings, students are grouped according to test scores, such as the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL). Groups read teacher-assigned texts meant to meet the student at their current reading level, slowly working their way up a hierarchy of texts.

This methodology, although somewhat successful, does not work well in the high school setting, when the push to encourage students to read needs to be at its peak. LCs are different than reading groups in three ways. According to Harvey Daniels (1994), students select the text in LCs, while in reading groups this is usually done by the teacher. While the teacher may select a theme around which all texts must revolve, it is ultimately the student who selects the book in LCs. Once students have made a list of their top three texts, the teacher groups them according to their book interest(s), *not* according to ability. The final way in which LCs differ from reading groups is in the day-to-day activity. LC students meet together on teacher-designated days and discuss their book, much like a book club. Reading group meetings are typically teacher-directed and leave little to no room for student design and creativity.

It is with these differences in mind this researcher hopes to promote life-long reading habits in high school students. By comparing traditional teaching methods, such as lecture and textbook reading, to a non-traditional teaching method (LCs), this researcher measured satisfaction and perceived level of learning with each method. An examination of student responses reveals what type of teaching method students enjoy most, as well as what method students learn the most from.

Literature Review

Literature pertaining to LCs takes many formats: background information about LCs, how to conduct LCs as a teacher, LC pros and cons, and academic research with the use of LCs. For this action research study, literature relating to LC research is most useful and important. To begin the literature review, a LC definition is in order. Marlow Ediger (2002) defines LCs in this way: “Literature circles generally involve four or five pupils who are actively engaged in cooperative learning. Learners...choose a library book to read based on interest” (p. 1). Beyond this simple definition, Catherine Day (2003), a veteran teacher and coordinator of the Goondiwindi State School Learning and Development Centre, goes on to explain that each member has “specific responsibilities as s/he prepares for the discussion, and each comes to the discussion with supporting notes related to her/his role” (p. 2). It is with this framework in mind this researcher conducted LCs in the secondary classroom.

Day (2003) wrote an opinion paper for the Primary English Teaching Association on reading and response with the use of LCs. In this paper, Day explains the LC process in detail, but also elicits the experiences of two colleagues: Jan Verney and Donna Ross. According to Verney, who tried the LC method with her Year 6 class in Queensland, “[i]ncreased independence, improved co-operative skills and better oral communication are among the benefits” of LCs (p. 10). She sees the benefits outweighing the challenges of LCs, and suggests changing the LC logistics to fit the needs of the classroom. Day’s other colleague, Ross, shared the benefits she experienced with her Year 4 class. She expressed the greatest challenge as a teacher was relinquishing control and allowing the students to take ownership. She felt it was time well spent, and students were fully engaged to the point where she had to place a time limit on sharing with the class. With relation to this action research project, Day’s LC findings show student success, but only in the elementary grades. Thus, this researcher’s need for a study examining LC use at the secondary level is evident.

Chia-Hui Lin (2002) reinforces the hypothesis that if students enjoy what they are doing, they will learn. Through study, Lin found various benefits of LCs on students’ learning, such as “(1) stronger reader-text relationships, (2) improved classroom climates, (3) enhanced degrees of gender equity and understanding, and (4) a learning environment more conducive to the needs and abilities of English language learners” (p. 4). Lin summarizes the study by concluding it is a collaborative effort between the students and teacher to “break away from the

traditional literature teaching methods,” (p. 6), which is the goal of this research study as well.

Jeng-yih Tim Hsu (2004), of the National Kaohsiung First University of Science & Technology, investigated LCs in English as a Learned Language (ELL) classrooms. Prior to the report on LC effects in an ELL classroom, theories supporting the use of LCs were revealed. First, Vygotsky’s (1978) “zone of proximal development” was discussed, showing support for “small, social group action consisting of learners with varying abilities” (Hsu, 2004, p. 3). Luckily in the secondary classroom, anytime students are grouped together, a wide range of abilities and life experiences are usually present. In this researcher’s study in particular, students were grouped not by ability, but by book choice, which took the teacher out of the planning equation and left it ultimately up to the students themselves. This researcher’s hypothesis was reinforced when Hsu (2004) wrote, “True learning is believed to occur on a social level when content becomes meaningfully and personally relevant” (p. 4). This shows that if a student is satisfied with the teaching method, they will learn from it. Rosenblatt’s (1995) reader-response theory is also mentioned by Hsu (2004): “[A] text is just ink on a page and will be useless unless a reader goes through it and gives his/her personal meaning” (p. 5). The ability to give a text personal meaning, whether the original personal experience was positive or not, is satisfying, and opens the door for real learning to happen. This researcher hopes to transfer Vygotsky’s (1978) and Rosenblatt’s (1995) discoveries to other students.

In an earlier study, this researcher looked into reading comprehension, which essentially determines if the student is truly learning from a text. In reviewing literature related to this topic, Almasi, Garas-York, and Shanahan (2006) “were surprised that only 12 qualitative studies,” concerning the topic of text comprehension instruction, “were available for analysis” (p. 20). Guthrie, Wigfield, Humenick, and Perencevich, et al. (2006) inspired this researcher to investigate the role text choice plays on comprehension when they revealed motivation as a predictor of reading comprehension. Depending on how motivated a student is to read the assigned (or chosen) text has an effect on their level of comprehension, which is what this researcher seeks to investigate with the LCs teaching method.

Not only do students need to be motivated, Atkinson (2000) revealed teachers should be motivated as well, which invokes a cyclical positive relationship with pupil motivation. This relationship was supported by an attitudinal scale analysis conducted by Atkinson (2000). If teachers wish to generate motivation among students, engaging lessons should be introduced with excitement. As Epstein (1994) revisited Fitzgerald’s (1979) *America Revised*, the famous critique of elementary and secondary school history and social studies textbooks, this researcher began to see evidence of student dislike toward textbooks in general. This is why this action research study compares the traditional teaching method of textbook reading with the non-traditional method of LCs. Epstein (1994) reported that “[a]ll of the students in the study said they

did not enjoy reading the textbook,” (p. 42), which should concern many educators, especially when this is virtually the only type of curriculum purchased with state and local taxes and levies. It was at this point of the literature review process it was clear the LCs teaching method was worth investigating.

Mercurio’s (2005) article rounds out this literature review by looking at suburban middle school students and the use of a self-selection reading program. By seeing how this study played out at the middle school level, this researcher knew it needed to be done at the high school level as well. Mercurio (2005) “notes that teachers must integrate self-selection of reading material into the current student curricula in order for students to become life-long readers” (p. 1). Her work proves the necessity for new and exciting teaching methods, such as the self-selected text method used in LCs. It is this, combined with satisfaction and motivation, that will produce learning and life-long reading habits among high school students.

Research Question

The main research question to be answered by this researcher is: “What teaching method are students satisfied with, as well as learning from?” The hypothesis connected with this research question is: “If students enjoy the teaching method, they will learn from it.” Sub-questions accompanying the main research question which relate to satisfaction include a) Are students satisfied with traditional teaching methods? b) Are students satisfied with textbook reading? c) Are students satisfied with lecture? d) If not textbook reading and/or

lecture, what teaching method(s) are students satisfied with? and e) Are students satisfied with literature circles? Sub-questions relating to the student's perceived level of learning include a) Do students learn from traditional teaching methods? b) Do students learn from textbook reading? c) Do students learn from lecture? d) If not textbook reading and/or lecture, what teaching method(s) do students learn from best? and e) Do students learn from literature circles?

Data-gathering

The participants in this study range in number from 25 to 24 because one student was unable to participate in the second portion of the survey. The participants are grouped into one cluster, which existed prior to the beginning of this study in the form of a class period. It is a convenience sample since the participants are also this researcher's students. All of the participants are enrolled in Honors Government, which is 12th grade coursework. The method by which the participants are clustered into this specific class period is conducted by high school administration and counselors. Placement in an honors level course happens when a counselor or previous teacher recommends the student. Excellent academic skills, as well as other courses, serve as pre-requisites for the rigorous course. These details suggest some participant limitations and/or bias.

Instruments of use in this study include one pre-test, one post-test, and nine LC books. Each instrument meets guidelines for protecting human subjects, and permission has been obtained for their use. The pre- and post-tests seek to answer the research question(s) by directing students to rate their opinions using a

Likert scale (one symbolizes a low response, and five being a high response). The pre-test focuses on student responses concerning traditional teaching methods, while the post-test asks about satisfaction and perceived level of learning when taught with a non-traditional teaching method, such as LCs. A full copy of the pre- and post-tests are in Appendix A. This researcher chooses to use a short survey format because it suits the time available in class, and yields the most accurate participant responses. A numbered Likert scale survey is an appropriate instrument for measuring student satisfaction and perceived level of learning because of the ease with which this researcher can perform a statistical analysis with the numeric results.

The pre-test was administered to 25 participants simultaneously, and in the same location. Prior to distribution, participants were asked to take out a pen or pencil, and complete the survey in silence. After tests were distributed and completed, this researcher then collected the surveys, and tallied them using computer software. After completion of LCs, the post-test was administered to 24 students in the same exact way as the pre-test. Again, participant responses were collected and tallied by this researcher for further study.

The other type of material is the novels selected by this researcher. All nine fiction and non-fiction books fall under the theme of “Government’s role in society,” and are of varying young adult reading levels. This theme fits the cluster’s original purpose (completion of a course in Honors Government), and also allows this researcher a non-traditional avenue of investigation in student

satisfaction and learning. The books portray a wide array of social issues, many of which our government grapples with daily; such as immigration, food and drug regulation, out-sourcing, media, civil rights, issues of citizen privacy, and the rights of medical patients, minors, and workers. In alphabetical order, the novels are: *Anthem* by Ayn Rand, *Ask Me No Questions* by Marina Budhos, *Fast Food Nation* by Eric Schlosser, *Feed* by M. T. Anderson, *The Fountainhead* by Ayn Rand, *My Sister's Keeper* by Jodi Picoult, *Naughts & Crosses* by Malorie Blackman, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell, and *The World Is Flat* by Thomas L. Friedman. To introduce and share books with participants, a librarian gave “book talks” on each book in an un-biased manner. Originally this researcher hoped that when students declared their top book choices, the number of books would scale down, but there was such a wide array of interest, all nine books were read.

The first step in conducting this action research study was to create, conduct, and collect the pre-test, which asks students to rate their satisfaction and perceived level of learning when taught with traditional teaching methods. The two traditional teaching methods described in the pre-test are textbook reading and lecture. Participants were directed to think about their educational experience as a whole, not just the specific Honors Government class. Participants received and completed the pre-test under identical controlled variables, such as time and place. This researcher then collected the pre-tests, and recorded participant results in a computer software program for future use.

Next, this researcher informally investigated how others have used LCs as a non-traditional teaching method. Various questions were asked, such as, “How long does it take to conduct LCs?” and “What does the teacher do while the students engage in their book club discussion?” These questions proved there are many different ways to conduct LCs, and no one formula is right or wrong. After gathering various points of view, this researcher chose a theme and selected books to match. Once the theme of “Government’s role in society” was formulated, a school librarian searched for and ordered books for participant use. Upon arrival of the books, the librarian gave a brief “book talk” on each of the nine novels by summarizing the plot and describing the author’s writing style to all 25 participants. Participants then wrote down on a piece of scratch paper the title of their top three favorite books based on the librarian’s presentation. The preferences were collected and tallied, and each participant was placed into a LC based on their first or second choice. No participant was forced to read a book that wasn’t one of their top two choices, and each group was given the option of abandoning a book if all members agreed to do so. This happened within one group that began reading *Anthem* by Ayn Rand, but then switched half way through to *The Fountainhead*, also by Ayn Rand. This practice is in line with the LC goal of promoting life-long reading habits because of the many times adults abandon books they find unsatisfactory.

With LCs underway, the procedural steps can take many forms. This researcher chose to have LCs happen over the span of a one month period. LCs

met every other day, and were student-planned, led and directed. With the help of *Mini-lessons for Literature Circles* by Harvey Daniels and Nancy Steineke (2004), this researcher suggested activities for LCs to engage in, although most were optional. Some activities included creating a reading calendar so participants knew how many pages to read by specific dates, re-designing the cover of their LC book, creating a story board or comic strip of the novel's climax, and briefing the president on a pressing social issue present within the novel. All of the LCs were required to participate in at least five of the activities, although many engaged in more than that. Participants were asked to keep a portfolio of group work, notes, questions, etc. that arose during their book club discussions. Participants culminated their LC work with a presentation to the class. Six options were given by this researcher for the method in which participants could present their book to the rest of the class. Many groups chose "Reader's Theater," a technique of acting out key turning points of a novel so as to encapsulate the book into a brief ten minute skit. All groups were required to explain how their novel related to the theme of "Government's role in society."

Once LCs concluded, this researcher gave the post-test to 24 participants. The post-test asks for student responses relating only to the non-traditional teaching method of LCs. Students were asked to rate their level of satisfaction and perceived level of learning. Tests were collected, tallied, and entered into a computer software program for future statistical analysis.

Confounding variables this researcher was unable to control include student responses. Although asked to think about their educational experience as a whole, a participant may have answered the pre-test questions with the Honors Government class specifically in mind. Another confounding variable is the books chosen for the study and other participants. While students were grouped according to preference, some may have found they disliked the book or group members altogether, which could have had an impact on the way they answered questions in the post-test.

Analysis of Results

The pre-test results were entered into Microsoft Excel for statistical analysis. Each participant's survey was labeled alphabetically as follows: Student A, B, C, and so on. A table of each participant's pre-test response is located in Appendix B. The post-test results are also recorded in Appendix C, but the labeling of students is in such a way so each student's pre-test response matches with their post-test response. Therefore, "Student A" in the pre-test table is the same "Student A" in the post-test table. For each question, a statistical analysis was performed to find the mean, median, and mode, which is located in Appendix D. The main focus of this report focuses on the mean, or average, response to each question even though the median and mode are also included in the data tables.

Question one focuses on the teaching method of textbook reading, and participants are asked to rate their satisfaction with this traditional method. On a

scale of one (low) to five (high), the average participant response was 2.44. This result leads this researcher to believe students are not satisfied with the traditional teaching method of textbook reading. Question two asks participants to rate their level of satisfaction when taught with the traditional teaching method of lecture. The mean was 3.16, leading this researcher to believe that while students enjoy lecture more than textbook reading, they are only satisfied with it at an average rate. The third pre-test question asks for a student rating of their perceived level of learning when taught with the traditional textbook reading method. The mean rate of learning was 3.34. Given students are only satisfied with textbooks at an average rate of 2.44, the learning response seems high because it is almost one full rating level higher than the satisfaction response. This researcher believes that while students are not satisfied with this traditional method, they are still learning at an average rate when taught with textbooks. The final pre-test question asked students to rate their perceived level of learning when taught with lecture. When a statistical analysis was applied to participant responses, a mean of 3.74 appeared. This was the highest average rating in the pre-test. This indicates students are satisfied with and learn more from lecture than textbook reading.

The post-test begins with question five, asking students to rate their satisfaction with the non-traditional teaching method of LCs. On a scale of one to five, participants rated their LC satisfaction at an average rate of 4.02. This is the overall highest rating of the pre- and post-tests, indicating that of all of the

teaching methods students were asked to rate, students enjoy LCs the most. The final question asks students to rate their perceived level of learning when taught with LCs. This non-traditional teaching method received a mean score of 2.84, the lowest among the three questions pertaining to learning. This indicates that while students enjoyed LCs, they do not believe they learn from this non-traditional method.

This study seeks to answer the research question, “What teaching method are students satisfied with, as well as learning from?” Given the data results, this researcher would say lecture is the teaching method that elicits the highest overall satisfaction and learning rating. According to the data, participants prefer lecture over textbook reading and LCs for two reasons. First, even though students dislike textbook reading, they still feel they learn more from this traditional teaching method than the non-traditional method of LCs. Surprisingly, while students enjoy LCs, they do not perceive they are learning from them, which reinforces lecture as the top teaching method chosen by these participants.

To further investigate the results of this action research study, the hypothesis should also be examined. The hypothesis states: “If students enjoy the teaching method, they will learn from it.” In one case this hypothesis is true, but in the other two cases, it is not. On average, students were satisfied with lecture at a rate of 3.16, and perceived their level of learning with lecture at a rate of 3.74. Even though both results are only in the mid-range, they are consistent and imply students are satisfied and learning at a moderate level, which meets the

stated hypothesis. Textbook reading satisfaction received a lower average rating of 2.44, while participants rated their level of learning a bit higher at 3.34. These results are inconsistent with this study's hypothesis; implying that even though students dislike the teaching method, they are still learning with it at a moderate level. The final teaching method participants rated was LCs. While this researcher originally predicted LCs would be the method of choice among participants, the data show otherwise. Students rated their LC satisfaction at an average of 4.02. If these results proved the hypothesis, then LC learning would be equal to or greater than the level of satisfaction. Instead, participants rated their perceived level of learning at a mean score of 2.84, which is inconsistent with this researcher's hypothesis. In this case, even though participants were satisfied with the non-traditional teaching method, they perceived a low level of learning. Therefore, the results of this study are inconsistent with this researcher's hypothesis.

Conclusions and Applications

This researcher envisions the results of this study affecting the way others teach in a dramatic way. This action research study was conducted because of the belief that students are dissatisfied with traditional teaching methods, and are hungry for a new way of learning in the classroom. This hypothesis is reinforced by a report entitled *Balancing Books & Bytes* (Britt, Brasher, & Davenport, 2007). While these researchers do not believe computers should replace books, they do believe that "sharing a book can employ contemporary strategies, such as project-

based learning that provide[s] an exciting balance between traditional teaching and technology tools” (Britt, Brasher, & Davenport, 2007, p. 127). While students harbored low to middle ratings of satisfaction and learning with both textbook reading and lecture, this researcher’s prediction was proven right in the satisfaction category; that students would find LCs more satisfying.

These results will hopefully influence teaching styles by causing teachers to use traditional teaching methods less, while implementing and improving novel teaching methods, such as LCs, into curriculum on a regular basis. For future study, researchers could investigate the actual level of learning as opposed to students’ perceived level of learning. This suggestion would give more depth and statistical analysis options. Studies like this one are conducted because educators everywhere are in relentless pursuit of an answer to the questions, “What engages students?” and, “How do they learn?” While there is no single answer to these difficult questions, continuous study of student response to various types of curriculum can only help student learning and the teaching profession in the long run. Though students in this research study did not find LCs to be a method they learn from, this researcher intends to use this information and revisit the LC teaching method, with the goal of positive student response in both satisfaction and learning.

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Appendix A

Pre-Test

On a scale of one to five (one being low, five being high), rate your satisfaction with textbook reading

1 2 3 4 5

On a scale of one to five, rate your satisfaction with lecture

1 2 3 4 5

On a scale of one to five, rate your perceived level of learning when taught with textbook reading

1 2 3 4 5

On a scale of one to five, rate your perceived level of learning when taught with lecture

1 2 3 4 5

Post-Test

On a scale of one to five, rate your satisfaction with literature circles

1 2 3 4 5

On a scale of one to five, rate your perceived level of learning when taught with literature circles

1 2 3 4 5

Appendix B

Pre-Test

Student	Question ¹	Question ²	Question ³	Question ⁴
A	2	2	3	2
B	4	3	4	3
C	1	4	3.5	4.5
D	3	3	4	4
E	3	4	4	4
F	4	2	4	3
G	3	2	4	3
H	3	3	4	4
I	2	3	3	4
J	2	3	1	3
K	3	5	3	5
L	1	3	3	4
M	2	5	3	5
N	3	3	5	5
O	4	3	5	4
P	1	1	5	5
Q	2	4	2	4
R	2	3	2	4
S	2	3	1	3
T	1	4	3	4
U	5	2	5	1
V	3	4	4	3
W	2	4	5	5
X	2	3	2	3
Y	1	3	1	4

¹ On a scale of one to five (one being low, five being high), rate your satisfaction with textbook reading

² On a scale of one to five, rate your satisfaction with lecture

³ On a scale of one to five, rate your perceived level of learning when taught with textbook reading

⁴ On a scale of one to five, rate your perceived level of learning when taught with lecture

Appendix C

Post-test

Student	Question ⁵	Question ⁶
A	4	4
B	2	1
E	3.5	1.5
G	5	4
H	2	1
I	4	4
J	4	4
L	5	4
M	3	2
O	5	4
Q	4	4
R	5	1
S	5	3
V	5	3
W	3	3
X	4	4
Y	4	2
Z	5	3
a	3	3
b	3	1
c	5	1
d	5	5

⁵ On a scale of one to five, rate your satisfaction with literature circles

⁶ On a scale of one to five, rate your perceived level of learning when taught with literature circles

Appendix D

Pre-test

Statistic	Question ⁷	Question ⁸	Question ⁹	Question ¹⁰
Mean	2.44	3.16	3.34	3.74
Median	2	3	4	4
Mode	2	3	4	4

Post-test

Statistic	Question ¹¹	Question ¹²
Mean	4.02	2.84
Median	4	3
Mode	5	4

⁷ On a scale of one to five (one being low, five being high), rate your satisfaction with textbook reading

⁸ On a scale of one to five, rate your satisfaction with lecture

⁹ On a scale of one to five, rate your perceived level of learning when taught with textbook reading

¹⁰ On a scale of one to five, rate your perceived level of learning when taught with lecture

¹¹ On a scale of one to five, rate your satisfaction with literature circles

¹² On a scale of one to five, rate your perceived level of learning when taught with literature circles