

Effective Book Clubs: Daily Reflections and Written Responses

By Kathy King-Dickman | Categories: Small-group Reading

This is the fifth installment in a series of posts with ideas and suggestions for running effective literacy circles or book clubs with students from second grade through high school. You can read the others in this series here.

Reflecting on Group Work

In the manner I have learned from Collaborative Classroom, students should reflect daily on how their behavior has affected themselves as well as the entire group. It is the teacher's role to:

"...create a classroom community in which your students feel a strong sense of belonging, psychological safety, autonomy, and responsibility to themselves and to the group. Teachers know that such an environment does not just happen; it must be deliberately created through setting up purposeful interactions among students, teaching them social and problem-solving skills, and helping them to see that the children's ability to learn reading comprehension strategies is inextricably linked to their ability to work together and bring democratic values like responsibility, respect, fairness, caring, and helpfulness to bear on their behavior and interactions."

(*Making Meaning Teacher's Manual*, p. xvii, 2015)

Taking just two to three minutes at the end of the workshop to reflect on the discussion can produce classrooms that work in the ways suggested above. Asking just one or two of the following questions can guide students to think about and monitor their own behaviors

- How did you treat other members of your group today?
- How did you act in responsible ways to help your group go smoothly?
- How did you explain your thinking today? What helped you explain your thinking?
- How well did you listen today?
- How did you add on to and extend the thinking of others in your group?
- What did you contribute today to the group discussion? How will you do better tomorrow?
- What is your group doing that is working well? What could your group improve on?
- Did your group have any problems? How did your group solve your problems?

We can also have students look at the rubric we will use to assess them to guide the discussion during reflection time. If students do not share about problems that arise in groups, the teacher might suggest that she saw a group struggling with a certain issue and ask the others for ideas to help solve this.

Charting students' suggestions at the end of these brief discussions can anchor this learning and serve as a guide to peruse prior to meeting with groups. For group work to be effective, students MUST have appropriate collaboration skills. Daily reflections set the tone for what is expected, but allows the suggestions to be students generated.

Written Reactions

The new Common Core Writing Anchor Standard 9 states that students should “Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.” In other words, students should be able to write about their reading. However, and I mean this as a loud HOWEVER, never ruin the reading by requiring too much writing. If we want our literacy circles to feel like adult book clubs that folks actually choose to take part in, we can’t kill the reading with too much writing.

Real book clubs require no writing. While we can’t afford to be this relaxed as we are hosting book clubs so that students will learn and meet the standards, we need to be very thoughtful about the amount of writing we require. I believe we must ask for just enough to help students learn and still love reading. I often tell my on-site audiences that writing should take up no more than ten percent of the reading/independent work time. To be clearer, I ask students to write short reactions to their reading daily that are kept in any manner the group chooses (refer to Section Two on launching book clubs). These can be one-word responses to short phrases to paragraphs. Any type of writing that helps students bring their thoughts to their group works for me. If a student writes short one-word thoughts and these work to allow the student to effectively contribute his or her reactions to the group, then I would give a score of 5 on the assessment rubric in the item *Marked my text in the manner group picked on a daily basis*

I also like to do a longer writing activity with students no more than twice per novel. These activities can be used to help assess a student’s work during the club, but the bottom line is that these writing activities should be enjoyable. None of them should feel like the book reports I spent much time cheating on when I was young. I hated these assignments, but more importantly, I did not learn from them. An effective writing activity for a book club should help a student sort through his/her thinking about a novel and share that thinking with the teacher so that we can gain a better window into that student’s comprehension. A few ideas are listed below:

Write Arounds

Harvey Daniels’s newest and possibly best suggestion for writing about reading can be found in his book *The Best Kept Teaching Secret*, written with his wife, Elaine (2013). Students love write arounds.

1. Use your best handwriting.
2. Use all the time I give you for writing. Keep your pen moving and NO talking.
3. Begin your letter with “Dear Friends” and write on the topic suggested for a minute or two. (The teacher can give an open-ended question such as, “Why do you believe the jury did not side with Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*? What did their decision reflect about our attitudes towards blacks during this era in our history?” Or “Why do you believe Boo Radley would only go out in the dark?” OR the teacher can ask the students to generate a rich question as they are reading. Prior to doing this, instruction must be given in generating rich questions that lead to great discussions. If there are several groups/novels going on at one time, the teacher can generate generic questions such as “What is the theme in your novel?”; “Who is the most important character?”; “How does the setting support the theme?”; and so on.)
4. After most students have about a paragraph written, have them rotate their papers, read what their partner wrote, and react to that in writing. Remember: NO talking.
5. After a minute or two, rotate papers again. This time they will need time to read both reactions and have time to respond, but do not give much time. Students need to feel that they must read and respond in just a few minutes.
6. When students get their own papers back after all have had a time to write on one another’s page, have them read all comments and highlight something that would make for great further discussion.
7. Then open it up for oral discussion, having each student share and talk about what he highlighted and why.
8. In order to assess student’s individual work on this activity it helps to have each student in the group use a different-colored pen.

To read more about this wonderful technique, read chapter five of the book mentioned above.

Fab Four

Have students work with a partner to choose four words that resonate for them from the novel or specific chapter just read. Then have them rework those four words into a statement or statements that explain the main idea, describe a character's trait, explain the setting, and so on. This is a fun and challenging writing activity that students enjoy because it is short. For instance, after reading Chief Joseph's famous "I Will Fight No More Forever" speech, I gave the students these four words to use: *heart*, *fight*, *dead*, and *forever*. I challenged them to state the main idea of this passage in one sentence. One group wrote: "My heart is sick, my people are dead, and no longer will we fight."

Five-Sentence Summary

Starting on the pinkie and working to the thumb, use these transitions: *First*, *Next*, *Then*, *And* and *Finally* to sum up a book or chapter. Be careful to not overuse summaries. Although they are important, this is not necessarily an enjoyable activity for the students. (Serravallo page 362)

Lifting a Line

Copy a line from your reading that affects you in some way. Just start writing your thoughts and try to write as much as possible about that line. When you are stuck, use these prompts to help you:

- *In addition. . .*
- *On the other hand. . .*
- *For example. . .*
- *This makes me think. . .*

For more transitions, use the ones in the next activity. (J.S. pg. 367)

Writing Long

Take a sticky note that contains a written reaction or response to something you thought or noticed recently while reading your novel. Write as much as you can about this note. When you are stuck, use these conversation starters to keep yourself going: *One example of this is. . . One more place. . . This makes me realize. . . This is important because. . . This is giving me the idea that. . . The reason for this is. . . This is true because. . . This connects with. . . On the other hand. . . Could it also be that. . . Might the reason for this be. . . This is similar to. . . This is different from. . . In my opinion. . . Something extraordinary about this is... This is shown. . . The author delivers. . . The book speaks of. . . I've come away from this story with. . . I see this in writing when. . . This connects with the whole story because. . . There is one thing in the story that doesn't fit for me, and it's. . . This might be present because. . . In the beginning. . . Then. . . later. . . finally. . . I used to think ____, but now I'm realizing. . . It is interesting how the character, or author says. . . Other parts of the text where I see. . . This author uses. . . I love how the author. . . This author wrote this in first/third person because. . . The setting of ____ helped with the story by. . . Some powerful words this author used are. . . An example of great sensory images was. . . The author let us know the characters by. . . This author shrunk/exploded time when. . . The author wrote in present/past tense because. . . (Idea from J.S. pg. 368, transitions from KKD.)*

Think-Pair-Write

Pose a rich question such as: "What is the theme in your novel?" "Who is your favorite character?" "How has the character changed?" "How does the setting affect the story?"

Have students think for half a minute. Next have them discuss with their groups. Finally, have them write about that question. Transitions from above can be helpful with this activity.

Character Connections Web

Write the main characters' names spread out randomly on a notebook page. Draw lines/arrows between the characters. On the lines, write how each character feels or acts or affects the other character(s) on the lines. (J.S. pg. 370)

Write from Inside the Story

Write as if you are in the novel. Try pretending you are the main character and write from his or her point of view about what is happening right now. Try another character. (J.S. pg. 375)