Mini-lessons that Support Effective Book Clubs

By Kathy King-Dickman | Categories: Literacy Circles, Implementation

This is the fourth 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.

As stated in previous sections of this series, mini lessons are not a necessary part of literacy circles/book clubs. If students are discussing at deep levels and collaborating effectively, our biggest role is to sit back and observe while enjoying the ride. However, when book clubs are not going well, teachers need to intervene with purposeful instruction based on observations and assessments. Remember the quote from the beginning of this series:

“When kids talk well about books, the conversations can be invigorating, engaging, and enlightening. When they do not go well, kids get bored and off task and time is wasted. What most kids often need is instruction in how to talk well, period, and also how to talk well about books.” (Serravallo, 2015)

The following topics for mini-lessons can help us to intervene in ways that get students to “talk well about books,” while learning much about collaboration and comprehension in the process.

After teaching a mini-lesson on any topic below, students should read with that purpose in mind and be challenged to discuss this focus first in their book club. For instance, after a mini-lesson on theme, students should read trying to determine the theme of their book; during their group, theme should be the first topic of discussion.

The lessons below do not need to be taught to all students and do not need to be taught in any order. Particular topics should be chosen based on what students need in order to conduct grand conversations. Also, particular topics should be chosen based on what the students need to learn that help them understand all literature—not just the book they are currently reading. These lessons can also be taught to the entire class or to certain groups on an as-needed basis; they can even be used in individual conferences with a child who is struggling to contribute to the group conversation. The following list is meant to be a smorgasbord of choices. For instance, if you notice students floundering in working in any of the ways or including any of the topics suggested below, create a mini-lesson around that topic.

Another way this list of topics might be used is as a simple reminder to each group. All of these concepts might have been taught heavily during the first part of the school year, and a simple reminder will spur students to include them in their discussions. If this is true, you might simply give each group the mini-lesson list as “topic discussion starters” to post in their meeting area. If the discussion halts, the students can peruse the list to come up with ideas to push them to discuss something new about their novel or to improve
the quality of their collaboration.

This list could also be given to each student to peruse prior to and during the reading of their novel; students can use the topics to inspire what they write about or to guide what they make note of to share at group time. Students need to understand that as they read, their job is to notice things that they want to share and discuss with their group. Literature circles/book clubs are a time for very purposeful independent reading in a book shared with others. Students are expected to come to group with reactions and thoughts to share.

With all of this said, it is still true that the more background students have had in reading for deeper meaning and working in collaborative settings, the less support they will need with lists, prompts, or mini-lessons.

NOTE: In the section below, ideas from Jennifer Serravallo’s *The Reading Strategies Book* are marked with J.S. and the page number the idea appears on. All other ideas are my own or are generic.

**Topics about collaboration**

- Equal voice time
- The stance of a listener (face the speaker, make eye contact, avoid fidgeting or fiddling)
- Responding to one another in ways that build the conversation: making connections, disagreeing, agreeing, adding on, elaborating... (J.S. page 329)
- Using Center for the Collaborative Classroom prompts "I agree with______ because...., I disagree with _____ because..., or I agree, but I would like to add...."
- Disagreeing respectfully
- Taking turns: Students bring sticky notes to the group with their reactions written down. The first student puts his/her sticky in the middle. Students discuss this idea thoroughly before putting the next student's sticky note in the middle. (J.S. page 336)
  - Another excellent lesson for taking turns can be found in *The Reading Strategies* (J.S. page 332)
- Questioning another’s ideas or thinking: use prompts such as “Why are you thinking..., Can you explain why you think..., Where in the novel did you find that...?”
- Willingness to take on new thinking
- Knowing when to stick to an idea and when to move on

Serravallo dedicates an entire chapter to effective communication with easy-to-follow lesson plans. I suggest teaching many of her lessons if students are not collaborating effectively. (See Chapter 12, “Supporting Students’ Conversations: Speaking, Listening, Deepening Comprehension.”)

**Topics about comprehension and writer’s craft**

- Predicting
- Inferring
- Confusions and questions (how to bring these to the group)
- Connections
- Imagery
- Determining importance: What is worth remembering?
- Author’s purpose
- Theme
- Plot: What is the conflict? How do you predict it will be resolved?
• Describe the setting: How is it important to the story?
• Powerful language
• Characters: How are they developing or changing?
• Great passages or phrases: explain why you liked them
• Genre of the book
• Author's use of time: consecutive, flashbacks, foreshadowing, etc.
• Tense the author uses: Is it past, present or future, or a combination? How would the novel change if it were told in a different tense?
• Author's use of point of view: How would it change the book to be written from a different point of view?
• Compare setting to that in other novels
• Compare characters within the novel to those from other books
• Compare the plot to other novels' plots
• Writer's craft/Author's style: Powerful words or phrases, run on sentences, sensory images, symbolism, metaphors, similes, etc.
• Use of evidence from the text to defend thinking