Encouraging Student-Generated Critical Questions through Literature Circles in a Tenth-Grade Classroom

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ENCOURAGING STUDENT-GENERATED CRITICAL QUESTIONS THROUGH
LITERATURE CIRCLES IN A TENTH-GRADE CLASSROOM

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Overview

My personal and professional experiences have shaped my teaching strategies. While I was confident in most of those strategies, I realized through conversations with students and assessments of student work that my teaching, particularly when using a long text like a novel or piece of nonfiction in my classroom, relied too heavily on teacher-centered instruction. I tended to lecture, ask the entire class leading questions, and generally treat students as the receivers of knowledge and not the creators of it. As I learned in my teacher preparation program, a constructivist approach is often more effective and prescribed as the best way to engage and include all students. Yet, I had observed anecdotally that students who are most successful in my class are those for whom teacher-centered instruction is the easiest way to learn. Through initial exploration of various solutions, such as teaching strategies that put the students at the center of their learning, I continually found myself reading about Daniels’ *Literature Circles* (1994). When effectively implemented, Daniels’ framework seemed to be an effective way to make my classroom more student-focused. While previous research (Soares, 2009; Nolasco, 2009; and Klinger, et al., 1998) shows that literature circles can be an effective tool for teaching students to be more independent in their discussions and to use class time to work in groups and on their own, I wondered what other specific skills literature circles could support.

When I teach required English classes (classes taken as part of the general curriculum as opposed to advanced or honors course), I saw a need for new student-centered strategies. I struggled with the fact that many of the students seem to have been socialized to engage as little
as possible with their teachers and fellow students in the classroom. Supporting these observations, Raphael and Au (2005) found that many students are not taught “strategic or critical thinking” during their K-12 years (p. 209). Anecdotally, I had also noticed that students do not think critically, particularly when asking questions. Shaw (2014) bolsters the connection between thinking and questioning when he explains that “asking a lower-level thinking question that requires only the recall of facts does not spur critical thinking” (para. 10).

I have also wondered what specific experiences were at the root of this lack of engagement. For example, my students seemed conditioned by their previous learning experiences to orient their learning toward tests that assess, in terms of Bloom’s Taxonomy, knowledge and comprehension, but not analysis, synthesis or evaluation (Krathwohl, 2002). When I consulted with colleagues about the summative assessments they use in their classrooms, I noticed a trend that indicates one source of this conditioning. More specifically, many colleagues provided me with copies of multiple-choice tests that are at least 60 questions long. The vast majority of these questions asked for comprehension and not critical thinking. For example, on a test about Lorraine Hansberry’s play, A Raisin in the Sun, a question like, “Ruth, Walter and Beneatha give Mama a gift of _____” is generally representative of the surface-level questions that students are used to responding to. The above question works as a check for understanding, but not as a summative assessment. It does not check for a student’s ability to apply, connect or evaluate information. Thus, most of my students have been expected to use rote memorization on a regular basis, so naturally the questions that the students themselves ask follow suit.

Marzano (1992) established that a powerful way to teach specific kinds of thinking is to
demonstrate questions that cue critical thinking and then encourage students to create their own questions. Perhaps, with strong prompting and instruction from their teacher, students can be taught to ask critical questions and, therefore, improve their skills in critical thinking and engagement. With literature circles as my framework and developing critical questions to support these in-class activities as my goal, I arrived at my research question: Can self-directed literature circles motivate tenth grade students in my English class to generate their own critical questions?

This introductory section approaches this question in three parts. First, I explored my personal and professional background in order to reveal how I arrived at my teaching style, and the ways that I reflected critically on my own practices. Next, I discussed the major challenges I expected to face with this study before collecting data. Finally, I reviewed the research on literature circles in order to form a baseline of knowledge so that I could effectively implement literature circles in my classroom.

My Background

I have felt a tension between my educational philosophy and the teaching style with which I was most comfortable. I have always been a strong believer in education as a tool of democracy and as a tool with which to fight oppression. The excerpts I had read from Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in a literature course during my graduate studies led me to consider myself a student of his philosophy (Shaull, 2000). Like Freire, I believe that students need to be creators of their own understanding and not just drones who repeat knowledge back to their teachers. Despite these philosophical beliefs, I tended to over-rely on teacher-centered instruction. That is, I struggled with applying Freire’s philosophy to my own practice.
On a personal level, I chose to become a teacher after coaching high school competitive speech for many years. Competitive speech is an activity in which students perform ten minute plays in front of small audiences with no costumes, lights or sets. While coaching students in performance, I found myself drawn to the process of student growth. Students are, in the end, responsible for their own performances and competition. Unlike many school-related experiences, students do not find success simply by imitating a teacher or coach. Instead, they are expected to find their own style, voice and approach. They are, in a sense, required to figure out who they are as people in order to be successful in this activity. Since I enjoyed being a speech coach immensely, I decided to turn my passion into a career as a teacher of English. The personal and intellectual growth process students experience in speech is similar to what I have hoped to inspire in my classroom with Communication Arts and Literature content.

My Teaching Style

Despite my student-focused goals outlined above, my teaching style tends to be teacher-focused. Culturally, I have been conditioned to use spoken language as a primary form of communication. I grew up in a family and peer group of “talkers,” thus, I have enjoyed the intellectual challenge of unraveling complex ideas in order to reveal the basic underlying concepts. My experiences and cultural background have taught me that the easiest and most comfortable way of teaching is to use a traditional lecture where students respond to questions by raising their hands. I am most comfortable setting students up to answer prompts with leading questions. I am uncomfortable when students are struggling or are silent because I instinctively interpret these behaviors as signs of a negative learning experience, despite the fact that these traits are not necessarily problematic. In fact, the internal struggle itself is part of the learning
process and how students create their own knowledge. Also, despite my initial assumption that silence means a student is disengaged, for some students, silence can be a way of showing understanding.

Thus, while I have had some success with teacher-centered instruction, as seen through formative and summative assessments, there are major flaws in a teacher-centered pedagogy. Most prominently, it discourses the kind of discovery and student-created knowledge that I strive for and, consequently, sends the message to students to be passive, rather than active, learners.

This Study

While believing in the benefits of student-led discovery, I still was most comfortable with teacher-centered learning. I planned a unit with this in mind during the 2013-2014 school year, the year prior to starting my capstone project. At the time, I was gaining confidence in placing students at the center of their own learning. Part of the curriculum included a unit where students chose a memoir to read with a small group. I created tasks for weekly meetings and a system for assessing their notes and mini-lessons for each section of the book. The students’ notes revealed little critical thinking because my expectations were unclear and students were rarely engaged in any high level of dialogue. There was great potential in a unit with student-selected groups and texts for both my professional growth and for student educational growth. For me, a unit like this was an opportunity to create the ideal learning atmosphere. For students, this opportunity could improve their conversations about the texts they were reading. My goal was to build and improve upon that unit for this project.

Challenges
I anticipated a number of challenges before using literature circles as a tool to transition from teacher-centered instruction to a more student-centered classroom. I will detail the challenges here in order to lay the groundwork for a successful literature review.

**Modeling.** Literature circles require clear guidance from the teacher in order to be successful, as students need instruction on discussion techniques and strategies for integrating critical questions. Last year, when I taught the unit using a model similar to literature circles, I spent more time on reading strategies (the focus of the unit) and less on discussion strategies. As a result, students met, shared their findings, but did not engage in further discussions. Additionally, I spent too much time modeling the reading strategies; as a result, students grew less engaged as the unit moved into the fourth and fifth weeks. Therefore, I noted the need to limit teacher-focused time while modeling these strategies. For this study, it was hard to predict the ideal balance of teacher talk time to student talk time, but I expected that to become clear through research on best practices with literature circles. Based on previous experience, I expected the ideal balance of teacher talk time to be about a day or two of teacher-led instruction at the start of the unit, followed by 5-10 minute mini-lessons throughout. I focused the instruction on the creation and use of critical questions in discussion.

**Culture.** Based on my observations, most of my students spent a good deal of their time in classes that emphasized rote learning over critical dialogue. These experiences caused the students to form habits which, I predicted, would provide a challenge to using literature circles effectively.

Anecdotally, when asked why school matters, most of my students will say that education leads to jobs; very few say that it leads to happiness, a better society or personal growth. This
mindset seems to cause a roadblock to inquiry because what students perceive as learning is not necessarily representative of authentic learning. With this passive mindset, students are driven by their GPAs and grades, which are traditionally seen as markers of educational success compared to authentic learning, something that is harder to measure. With this reality in mind, I needed to find a way to tie successful literature circle interactions and use of critical questions to grades.

**Process.** I expected to find conflicting information when it came to the ways I might create groups, assign roles and assess student work. From the review, I gained a strong sense of what has come before, but making the decisions on how best to study this methodology in my own classroom was complicated. I needed to weigh that tension between my comfort as the leader in the classroom and my discomfort as observer of student-led struggle and learning.

**Conclusion and Next Steps**

In order to implement literature circles most effectively, I went on to research the definition, pedagogy, development and philosophical reasoning behind literature circles and how different teachers have used literature circles for different reasons: some to increase engagement and motivation, some to improve discussion skills, some to improve high level thinking and some to increase comprehension. The research revealed specific examples of each of these reasons.

Finally, I explored more established methods for implementing literature circles, which included role assignment, group and text selection, assessment and modeling. I also researched the successes and failures of the multiple ways teachers have implemented literature circles with various age groups and ability levels, which revealed what could be effective in my classroom to move myself toward leading a more student-centered classroom.
In addition to the research on literature circles, I researched the philosophy and implementation of Raphael and Au’s (2005) Question-Answer Relationship strategy for teaching critical questions in order to most effectively answer the question, can self-directed literature circles motivate tenth grade students in my English class to generate their own critical questions?
CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Overview

This chapter provides background information in order to answer the central question of this capstone: Can self-directed literature circles motivate tenth grade students in my English class to generate their own critical questions? Through anecdotal experience, introductory research and observations, I have observed the potential of literature circles to create engaging, text-based learning. Literature circles are a form of student-led inquiry, which is the key to authentic and meaningful learning (Harvey and Daniels, 2009). Additionally, because literature circles use the small-group setting, which has many real-world applications, they often lead to authentic discussion, which often leads to greatly increased comprehension and the most lasting and meaningful learning (Harvey and Daniels, 2009). Aside from all of these benefits, for this study, my goal was to inspire student inquiry. Therefore, I chose to focus on using student-generated critical questions as the central focus of the literature circles. And, by investigating the philosophy and implementation of Raphael and Au’s (2005) Question-Answer Relationship strategy, I was able to define a way to measure student inquiry within literature circles.

Philosophy

Traditional, teacher-centered, or “one teaching style fits all” learning “is not working for a growing number of diverse student populations” (Brown, 2003, p. 49). Teacher-centered approaches often do not consider students’ learning styles, but are still the kind of learning most students have been exposed to for the majority of their school careers. In practice, this means that
students are rarely encouraged to ask further questions about what they have learned. Instead, they are mostly asked to report back what they have learned (Harvey and Daniels, 2009). In other words, students are being asked to recall but not synthesize or analyze their learning. The research above supports the common belief that in U.S. classrooms teachers are mostly talking and students are mostly listening. Most notably, Pianta, Belsky, Houts and Morrison (2007) found that fifth grade students listen to teacher-centered instruction for 91 percent of their day.

In contrast to the common practice of teacher-centered education, Piaget’s constructivist theory established that learners learn best by drawing on their experiences (Maraccini, 2011). In practice, experiences are best encouraged through learner-centered classrooms that, as explained by Altan and Trombly (2001), “place students at the center of classroom organization and respect their learning needs, strategies and styles” (as cited in Brown, 2003, p. 49). Literature circles fit perfectly into a constructivist teaching practice. Day and Ainley (2008) explain the philosophy behind literature circles by synthesizing the socio-cultural theory of Vygotsky (1978) and the transactional theory of Rosenblatt (1938). The social and cultural interactions of literature circles improve language learning and literacy, while the personal interaction with the text combines the student’s perspective with the text to create new meaning.

The social and cultural philosophy behind literature circles is not just theory. In practice, Smiles (2005) found that conducting a study of literature circles in her own classroom helped her (the teacher) listen to her “own biases, and [those of] the community and broader society, for the purpose of understanding student engagement. . . . learning how to listen is, perhaps, the most important implication of this research” (p. 237). Smiles’ (2005) findings support Rosenblatt’s transactional theory because the students had an active role in their own learning. This type of
listening by teachers also serves to affirm the cultural backgrounds that students bring to the classroom and to help them create new meaning through personal interactions with the text. Instead of sitting in rows and being told by the teacher what they need to know, the students in these carefully structured literature circles are actively engaging with the texts and creating new knowledge, which, as Piaget would argue, is the best way for students to learn because it encourages experiential learning (Maraccini, 2011).

Definition

In creating student-centered literature circles that promote active student engagement, I will use what have been identified as best planning practices to ensure that these specific active learning objectives are met. Daniels (2002) defines literature circles as “small, peer-led discussion groups whose members have chosen to read the same story, poem, article or book” (p. 107). This review found that implementation of literature circles in K-12 classrooms varies in terms of what texts are used, how groups are assigned and what roles students fill, but as a primary authority on the topic, Daniels (2002) describes the implementation of literature circles as a series of group meetings in which groups decide reading schedules, notate the text to prepare for each meeting, discuss the text and then share the entire reading experience with their community or peers. In other words, students are likely to emulate how adults manage their own reading schedules and discussions in book clubs and reading groups.

Comprehension vs. Critical Thinking

When involved in book groups, students tend to become more involved in dialogue about the text and comprehend the content better compared to when they complete independent reading tasks. Hillier (2004) found that students in these groups read together and were generally more
involved in their reading. Similarly, Ferguson & Kern (2012) noticed a “marked decrease in the number of students who ‘fake read’ their literature circle books” and they “observed an improvement in the depth and quality of the written responses as well as the observed discussions” (p. 26). The above studies indicate that literature circles can inspire exactly the kind of engagement that was lacking in my classroom, the kind of student engagement that leads to critical thinking.

While increased comprehension is important for student learning, because without comprehension, higher-level questions are difficult to ask, this study sought to use literature circles specifically to increase students’ use of critical questions. For the sake of this study, I used Fenty, McDuffie-Landrom and Fisher’s (2012) recommendation to use Bloom’s Taxonomy as a framework for discussing critical thinking. Therefore, I defined critical questions as questions that check for the levels that Bloom’s Taxonomy identifies as analysis, synthesis or evaluation (Krathwohl, 2002).

With Bloom’s framework in mind, Soares (2009) and Hillier (2004) both found that literature circles supported students’ critical thinking. For both gifted middle school students in Soares’ (2009) study and eleventh grade students in Hillier’s (2004) study, students considered multiple viewpoints and made connections with the text in order to apply the texts to real issues and real-world scenarios. Additionally, Hamilton (2013) found “observable gains occurred through the higher level of student questioning and students responding with evidence cited from the text” (p. 98). Furthermore, Day and Ainley (2008) studied a teacher’s experiences with her ELLs and students with special needs: “The most amazing thing that I discovered from watching my students in literature circles was that they are far more capable of producing higher-level
thinking on their own than I ever thought possible...They came up with the synthesis and analysis pieces all on their own, through their own student-led discussions” (p. 172). This above teacher’s reaction supports the earlier findings that literature circles can benefit students at all different reading levels, and more importantly, shows that literature circles, through their social and interactive nature, can be an effective tool in teaching students to think critically and ask critical questions.

**Cultural Shift**

Research has revealed that the transition to student-centered learning can be challenging for teachers, which echoed my own experiences as a teacher who has relied primarily on teacher-centered instruction. DaLie (2001) explains that “teachers are reluctant to give up power as the all-knowing expert. One perk of teaching is feeling like students look to teachers as fountains of wisdom. To relinquish some of the power back to the students is threatening” (as cited in Hiller, 2004, p. 80). To make this transition, teachers like me need to “shift our paradigm and “support the ideology” behind literature circles (Brown, 2003, p. 54). Porath (2014) quotes one such teacher explaining this shift:

> June fully admitted that this paradigm shift was difficult for her, as her mental image of a good teacher was one who stood in front of the class and directly imparted knowledge, and the move to a workshop format required different forms of teaching. (p. 634)

Day and Ainley (2008) also found this tension in practice in their study of literature circles in a classroom of 22 6th graders. In this particular study, the researchers had previously perceived that ELLs and struggling readers could not “have critical dialogue or deep discussions about books because they have difficulty comprehending texts” (p. 158). In other words, many
teachers are struggling to embrace the change for various reasons, including preconceived ideas about how underrepresented students read and teachers’ personal teaching styles.

Students also struggle to embrace a switch to literature circles, likely because of the extra preparation and work expected of them. Hamilton (2013) found that teachers generally enjoy implementing literature circles in their classrooms and would prefer to continue using this instructional method, but noted, conversely, an overall lack of enjoyment by students. The lack of enjoyment is not necessarily universal, as Nolasco (2009) explains: “During teacher/researcher observations students’ attitudes overall were positive in regards to literature circles. However, students mentioned that there was ‘a lot more class work and homework to do to get ready for each meeting’” (p. 27). While resistance does not prove the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of literature circles, it does suggest that students are actively comparing literature circles to more traditional teacher-centered methods, and many are not fully comfortable with this model because it deviates from what they are used to experiencing in the classroom.

In the end, teachers must embrace the change and “educate themselves” in order to lead students to embrace this new way of learning, (Maraccini, 2011, p. 48) which was consistent with my goals in completing this study. I hoped to also educate myself in order to embrace a new mindset in my classroom.

Types of Classrooms

Literature circles can be successfully implemented in many types of classrooms. Previous research generally focuses on English Language Arts classrooms in the middle and lower grades, but there is evidence of success at the secondary level, with other content area classrooms and with students of varying abilities.
Developmental Level. Literature circles can be successful in developmental as well as advanced courses. For example, Walston (2006) conducted a study on using literature circles in a mainstream English classroom, but suggested that applying the method to advanced or remedial classrooms as well. Walston also explains that “one advantage, however, of conducting this study in a developmental setting was the range of students’ learning styles, preferences, and skills; this variance allowed for an array of attitudes regarding group work, reading abilities and performance” (p. 80). On the other hand, literature circles can be very effective in a classroom with strong readers because they encourage higher-level thinking. Soares (2009) studied gifted middle school students and found that the literature circles provided:

- a context to try out new subjectivities and create counter texts, and a forum for gifted readers to apply their analytical reasoning and critical thinking skills by taking a critical stance, creating intertextual connections, and re symbolizing the unfamiliar worlds in texts into understandable worlds through lived experiences. (p. 234)

Thus, literature circles can be effective in many classrooms, regardless of the academic ability of the students.

Other Content Areas. English is not the only content area in which literature circles can be effective. All teachers should teach reading across their content areas, and literature circles can be a useful tool to attain this goal. Klingner, et al. (1998) and Nolasco (2009) studied the use of literature circles in social studies and science classrooms respectively. Klingner used a unit about the economy of Florida to study how fourth grade students respond to literature circles. This study focused on teaching comprehension strategies to one group but not to the control group. Nolasco found that most research on small-group reading strategies revolved around the
use of fiction, so she sought to confirm Klingner, et al.’s (1998) findings in a science classroom setting. Nolasco (2009) used a science textbook with fifth grade students to study their discussion skills and comprehension in comparison to traditional teacher-led science education. Both studies found that students in peer-led groups made strong gains in comprehension of content area knowledge and engagement with the texts themselves. In terms of secondary education, Hamilton (2013) found that secondary teachers need to “discard the content area specialist attitude and embrace the idea that all teachers must be teachers of reading if they are to help students to become successful both in academics and in life” (p. 96). In other words, the benefits of literature circles are not limited to traditional English literature curriculum.

**Role Assignment**

Considering literature circles’ demonstrated effectiveness in K-12 classrooms across grade levels and subject areas, I also needed to consider how to implement this strategy in my classroom with the goal of inspiring students’ use of critical questioning. The 1994 edition of Daniels’ book “promoted the use of a tool called ‘role sheets,’ where students were assigned various jobs like Questioner, Connector, Illustrator, Word Wizard, and Literary Luminary” (Daniels, 2006, p. 11). Role assignment sheets were a key piece of Daniel’s original design for literature circles. Ferguson and Kern (2012) used Pearson et al.’s (1992) seven comprehension strategies that all readers use to create new roles: Sensory Image Maker, Inference Maker, Questioner, Connector and Importance Determiner/Synthesizer (Ferguson & Kern). Additionally, Ratz (2008) used two alternate roles for a unit based on reading theatrical literature. He used the stage director, who “imagines and shares effective staging techniques with the group,” and a dramatic reader who “interprets and reads sections of the text for dramatic
effect” (p. 41). These studies all demonstrate the potential for customization and flexibility when creating and assigning roles to group members.

However, narrow roles can also place limits on student learning. When asked to consider other tasks outside of their assigned roles, students sometimes say, “It’s not my job” (Harvey, 2009, p. 276). Nolasco (2009) found that one of the groups in the study struggled because “they took literal interpretations of their role in the group and were not able to contribute to anyone else’s, which caused their discussions to be very short” (p. 29). It is possible to forgo assigning roles altogether, as Hillier (2004) found that, with strong guidance from their teachers, in the form of metacognitive skills focused on group dynamics, students found success on their own without specific roles.

**Modeling and teacher involvement**

Literature circles require teachers to model their expectations to their students, although not to the extreme of losing the goal of a student-centered focus. Harvey (2009) explains that it is important not to teach all concepts before giving students time to meet. The teacher’s instructions should be just enough to give students the tools to start. Walston (2006) also recommends the following:

> Teachers [should] spend more time modeling and scaffolding skills for students. Whether it be through the use of more “fish bowl” activities, direct instruction about the purpose and use of role sheets and response logs, or more in-depth whole-class discussions of what constitutes higher level thinking, it is vital that students have an understanding of the teacher’s expectations for literature circle discussions. (p. 81)
The research clearly indicated the importance of modeling my expectations and reminding students of these expectations throughout the unit. Daniels (2006) explains that later in his research, he found that “peer-led reading groups need[ed] much more than a good launching; they require[d] constant coaching and training by a very active teacher who uses mini-lessons and debriefings to help kids hone skills like active listening, asking follow-up questions, disagreeing agreeably, dealing with ‘slackers,’ and more” (p. 13). Walston (2006) supports this finding, as he found that “the most dramatic changes in the quality of student discussion during this discussion occurred after the researcher gave precise feedback...Often, the feedback was given by proposing probing questions, as opposed to quantitative scores for their discussions” (p. 81). Walston (2006) continues by explaining that “some students mentioned that they missed getting the teacher’s input when they broke up into their literature circles. One way to address this issue might be allotting specific time for groups to meet with the teacher, perhaps once a week” (p. 82). Here, the evidence pointed to a careful balance when it comes to teacher involvement. The teacher must give clear instructions, model discussion skills and be there for students without encroaching on the student-led nature of literature circles.

According to Daniels (2006), Steineke’s 2002 book, *Reading and Writing Together: Collaborative Literacy in Action*, explained “the step-by-step moves you must take to guide the group dynamics in your classroom. Most teachers seem to want to believe that if we have ‘a golden gut’ and ‘a heart for the kids,’ that they will collaborate skillfully (and magically) with each other in small groups. Oh, so wrong” (p. 13). For example, Klingner, Vaughn and Schumm (1998) explained that when “students lack background knowledge about a topic, it seems preferable for a teacher to conduct a whole-class preview prior to small-group work” (p. 11).
Overall, the research suggested that the teachers hold a great deal of responsibility for teaching the tools of literature circles, while also cautioning teachers not to put rigid boundaries on the structure to the point that it stifles student ownership of the learning process.

Despite the need for strong teacher involvement with literature circles, it is important for successful literature circles to make students the primary speakers in the conversation. Students should craft the timeline, guidelines, organization and expectations of their group meetings. They should also be the ones doing the talking, questioning and wondering. Smiles (2005) explains that literature circles changed her perspective on the nature of student interaction:

I was presented an opportunity to look deeply at student talk in my classroom and to elicit the perspectives of my students on what reading a complex novel with their peers is like within the context of peer-led literature circles. In hindsight, I realize that my intuitions related to what occurred within peer-led literature circles were incomplete, and in many ways inaccurate. (p. 237)

Additionally, Ratz (2008) credits his successful implementation of literature circles to the fact that his “assignments took into account students' suggestions, comments, ideas, and necessities, while balancing my need to see where students were in their comprehension and critical thinking” (p. 43).

Overall, despite the fact that the goal of literature circles is to facilitate student-centered learning, the research strongly suggests that the teacher still needs to provide carefully crafted modeling and feedback throughout the process in order to engage successful student learning.

**Student Choice**

Student choice in selecting the texts is a central component of the successful
implementation of literature circles. Research has shown that student choice has benefits for both students and teachers. Kennedy (2010) found that choice “led to greater discussion about the plot and events the characters were going through” concluding that it is important that the literature ‘is highly relevant to the lives of students’” (p. 84). Moreover, Daniels (2002) explained “the factor moderating pure choice, of course, is that we want to form small, functional discussion groups of people reading the same stuff” (“Forming, Scheduling and Managing Groups,” para. 3). In fact, Walston (2006) found that when students were given six novels to choose from, nearly all of the students wrote that they would have preferred a larger selection. Furthermore, in a different portion of this same study, students were not given a choice of texts, which Walston suggests “dramatically affected their motivation to complete the discussions, as well as the short answer essays” (p. 46). Thus, the literature strongly suggests that the success of literature circles often materializes when students are given choices in selecting the texts.

**Group Assignment**

Assigning groups is a challenging aspect of forming literature circles from teachers’ perspectives. Some argue for self-selecting groups, some for homogeneous or for heterogeneous ability-level groups, and finally, some for groups based on interest area. For instance, Walston (2006) found that students felt more comfortable discussing books with other people because they knew what to expect in a book club discussion; they were interested in the book’s title and what they had heard about the book from the researcher; they were not afraid to share their ideas with other people, having done so in class for the past several weeks; they wanted a book to read with their peers. (p. 71)
Additionally, Maraccini (2011) found that teachers “tend to favor grouping by interest over ability” because it keeps students “engaged and motivated to read” (p. 47, p. 55). Interest-based grouping leads students to consider reading appropriately challenging books. As Daniels (2006) explained, “When, with artful teacher guidance, kids get to pick their own books for reading and friends to read with, they can experience success, not frustration. Compare student choice to the typical teacher-chosen whole-class book, which is by definition too hard or too boring or too easy” (p. 11). In other words, interest will not only draw students to shared content interests, but also a collective interest in taking on academic challenges.

However, Walston (2006) found that while interest-based grouping does give some students the opportunity to become group leaders, it leaves some students behind “because of the group dynamic” (p. 80). The implication in these findings is that due to social dynamics, some students will be left out of conversations by more socially comfortable students. However, this same issue could be a concern with teacher selected groups as well. Despite the potential pitfalls, the evidence overwhelmingly pointed to the effectiveness of student-selected, interest-based groups for literature circles.

Critical Questions

With a body of research suggesting the effectiveness of well-executed literature circles, I next looked to the specific skill I aimed to teach during this unit of study. Raphael and Au (2005) wrote that since “students are not taught strategic or critical thinking,” they suggest that teachers should use Question-Answer Relationships (QAR) as a strategy to teach skills in critical thinking (p. 209). The QAR strategy identifies four types of questions: “Right There” questions require only a quick reference to the text, “Think & Search” questions require compiling
multiple textual references to create an answer, “On My Own” questions require only a student’s previous knowledge about a topic, with no reference to the text, and “Author and Me” questions require both textual reference and previous knowledge to answer. Furthermore, Rapel and Au (2005) explained that “over the years, it has become increasingly clear that there are advantages to introducing QAR language in terms of three binary comparisons: In the Book versus In My Head, Right There versus Think & Search, and Author & Me versus On My Own” (p. 209). For the sake of this capstone, I chose to use the latter two comparisons as my guide. My goal was not to delineate between book and previous knowledge, but between basic comprehension questions and text-based critical questions.

Shaw (2014) wrote that critical thinking is “active rather than passive and is of a higher-order and abstract nature” (para. 6). Additionally, Scriven and Paul (1987) identified synthesis, application and evaluation as elements of critical thinking. Therefore, “Author and Me,” which requires synthesis, application and evaluation, and “Think & Search,” which requires synthesis, fit the needs of this study. From personal observation, I have noticed that my students are generally comfortable with “Right There” questions and “On My Own” questions - most likely because these require little synthesis, application or evaluation.

As further evidence that “Think & Search” and “Author and Me” questions are more challenging for students to create and answer, Raphael and Au (2005) list the skills involved to answer their four types of questions. They do not list any skills for “Right There” or “On My Own” questions. However, for “Think & Search” students will need to make lists, describe, sequence and explain. For “Author and Me” questions, they note that students will need to make “Text-to-self, text-to-world and text-to-theme” connections. The complexity of “Author and
Me” and “Think & Search” questions indicated that focusing on these two types of questions within the QAR strategy would be an effective way to identify the kinds of questions I wanted students to ask during their discussions.

Conclusions and Preview of Chapter Three

In all, the literature demonstrated that literature circles are generally an effective tool for improving small-group discussion and higher-level thinking skills in many content areas and at different grade levels. Literature circles can inspire thoughtful discussion, inquiry and authentic learning, although they do not work all by themselves. Teachers must carefully consider the many variables that affect students’ experiences, and set up clear expectations and parameters.

When implementing literature circles, providing role sheets gives students clear expectations, but should be used only as a guide throughout the unit, if at all. Within the unit, the teacher should make an active choice to limit his or her talk time, but not eliminate it entirely, because of the importance of teacher-modeled inquiry, questioning and discussion skills. Students should be given a great deal of choice in the way in which groups and roles are assigned. Finally, grouping students by their interest levels seemed to be the most effective strategy to organize the groups because it leads to high levels of engagement. Using the QAR strategy as a framework, I focused on “Think & Search” and “Author and Me” questions as evidence of students’ ability to ask critical questions. QAR is the ideal framework for this study because it provides clear guidelines on what constitutes a critical question. In the next chapter, I will outline how I implemented and studied literature circles in my own classroom. My research question is as follows: Can self-directed literature circles motivate tenth grade students in my English class to generate their own critical questions?
CHAPTER THREE

Methods

Introduction

To recap, this study’s central question was: Can self-directed literature circles motivate tenth grade students in my English class to generate their own critical questions? As a teacher who is most comfortable with teacher-centered instruction, I had been searching for ways to maximize my students’ learning in literature-based courses. This study investigated students’ use of critical questions during a literature circle unit of study that took place in Spring 2015.

Chapter Three Overview

In this chapter I will describe the school and classroom setting where the study took place. It will provide school demographics, the background of this particular class and a sense of the school culture. Next, it will explain the decision to use a mixed method study. Finally, it will explain the unit of study and data collection techniques used.

Setting

The school at which the study took place is a large suburban high school in Minnesota with an enrollment of about 2,000 students. For the 2014-2015 school year, 23.5 percent were students of color; 13.9 percent were receiving free or reduced lunch (Anonymous, 2014).

The class in which the study was conducted consisted of thirty-two tenth grade students, five of whom had an IEP or other special educational plan that required accommodations. While modeling how to select texts for reading, factors such as reading level, interest level and availability of audio recordings were included, giving students the opportunity to select texts that
aligned with their abilities and interests. This study was conducted during a Literature/Writing II course. All students are required to take both Literature/Writing I and Literature/Writing II, each a 12-week trimester-length course, during their sophomore year. Students can choose to take an “honors” version of each course, which has a similar curriculum, but more rigorous expectations.

Students in this course have previously had a variety of other English teachers for Literature/Writing I and for ninth grade English. Ninth grade English is a full-year course, but some students had different teachers for one or more trimesters. The vast majority of the required reading has been of canonical literature, including, *Romeo and Juliet*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Odyssey*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Of Mice and Men* and various short stories. The heavy emphasis on the canon in the English curriculum is relevant because the texts used for these literature circle discussions were memoirs chosen by the students, which departed from the canonical fiction read as part of the general curriculum.

The overall tenth-grade curriculum focuses on literature that is meant to reveal various points of view on American life. In this particular class, for example, the students read an American play (*Arthur Miller’s The Crucible*) and an American novel (*Tim O’Brien’s The Things They Carried*). Students read memoirs as part of the curriculum in order to look at American life through non-fiction.

The class included twenty-three boys and nine girls. The racial makeup of the class was four African American students and twenty-nine white students. Students were given the opportunity to create their own groups of 3-5 students. While there is benefit to diversity within groups, I chose to prioritize pre-existing relationships between students and allow students to select their own groups. Self-selected groups seemed to give students the chance to work with
other students with similar interests and abilities. These bonds also allowed students to support each other more readily, thus creating investment within each group. This grouping did not lead to the racial homogeneity that I expected, but it did lead to gender homogeneity. All of the female students in the class were in two groups, and the rest of the groups were all male.

**Unit of Study**

**Overview.** The unit studied for this capstone was a four-week-long unit based on an assortment of memoirs that were read in small groups. In the past, for this course, students have selected memoirs based on a list provided by the school librarian and presented through book talks. However, based on my observations in this same course the previous year, students have generally not responded positively to those book talks because they are coming from an instructor-led lecture, so I chose to give students a wider array of choices and let them choose any published memoir. My rationale was that this could theoretically increase motivation and engagement (Kennedy, 2010; Walston, 2006).

Two and a half weeks before the first group meeting, I led a full-class discussion of memoirs and why these kinds of books are written. I asked questions about memoirs and memory, and students wrote in their notebooks, shared with their groups and then shared with the class. After this discussion, I solicited from the students strategies to find books and ideas for searches.

Then, students were given three days to research and choose a book and two weeks to acquire copies of the book. I did not assign specific roles to individuals within groups, but I did remind the class that group work can be frustrating for those who put in more work than others, so each student was expected to follow through on their promised contributions.
For the main four weeks of the unit, students met in groups six times to discuss the books, create questions and answer those questions. Students completed the unit with an individual assessment of their reading and questioning skills.

**Data Collection**

**Rationale.** This mixed-methods study employed more data collected through qualitative than quantitative methods. Mixed methods were used to broaden understanding of the effects of literature circles on critical questions (Creswell, 2008). Analyzing the use of self-generated critical questions was best studied using qualitative methods. Creswell (2008) explained that qualitative researchers try to develop a “complex picture of the problem or issue under study” (p. 176). The overall goal of this study was to improve my teaching practice by moving toward a more student-centered classroom, which is a holistic issue. Additionally, facilitating in-class discussions that engage students involves many variables. With qualitative research, as explained by Creswell (2008), “the intent is to explore the complex set of factors surrounding the central phenomenon and present the varied perspectives or meanings that participants hold” (p. 129). For this study, I analyzed lesson plans, student work samples, and my own teacher-generated reflections. I assigned scores to student-created questions on a 5-10 scale, then analyzed these scores to discern patterns in their ability to demonstrate mastery of the creation of critical questions.

**Lesson Plans.** A unit overview and daily plans for each lesson are included later in this chapter. Each section, which indicates one day of the unit, includes an outline of the concepts covered and the instructional methods used. I then compared my instructional strategies with student work and my reflections to see if the strategies aligned with learning goals.
**Student Work.** I asked each student to come prepared to each meeting with the quote graphic organizer (see Appendix A), which was checked for completion before each literature circle meeting. While not included in the final data analysis, completion of these graphic organizers was meant to serve as a reading check to ensure that students were completing the reading.

After each discussion, each group turned in the QAR organizer (Appendix B and C), which they had completed during that specific class meeting. The QAR organizer was used as the primary means of data collection to track student questioning skills. Although this organizer was adjusted between meeting #2 and meeting #3, the essential task remained the same.

Using this QAR organizer, the scores assigned to “Think & Search” and “Author and You” questions were the primary quantitative data sources for this study. A score of 10 was assigned to questions that were critical and met the requirements of the type of question. A 5 was assigned to questions that were completed but did not meet the requirements of that specific question type.

**Teacher Reflections.** After each day of the unit that involved instruction or a student meeting, I filled out a reflection form. I used the same template for this reflection for each class meeting to ensure consistency (see Appendix E). These data were compared to lesson plans, student work and the student question tracking. As the ultimate purpose of this capstone is improving my teaching practice, comparing these three types of data was a useful tool.

**Data Analysis**

In this study, the subjective nature of my reflections were compared to numerical scores I gave to the student-generated questions. My goal was to be able to make sure that, when
quantified, the results from the student work samples supported my reflections. The lesson plans and my reflections will reveal relationships between the teaching methods and outcomes.

**Human Research Subjects**

Since I was working with minors, I sent home a letter to parents (see Appendix G); 22 parents signed and returned the letters to give full consent for their children to participate in this study. For data based on group results, all students were included, as each individual student’s work was completely anonymous. For the final assessment, only data from students with full parental consent was included in the write-up. I also wrote a letter directly to the students (see Appendix F) to explain the purpose of this study and to advise them of the protocols for informed consent. Additionally, I received permission from the district in which the study was conducted (see Appendix H) and from Hamline University (see Appendix I). No student names were included in the data. I also transcribed student work to avoid associating handwriting with any student, as well as any other identifying factors.

**Unit Plan**

Below, I have outlined the overall unit in a unit-at-a-glance table format, a format I learned in the Hamline University Masters of Arts in Teaching program. The overview is followed by more detailed individual lesson plans. Chapter Four will explain the rationale behind changes in lesson plans as they developed.

**Unit-at-a-glance.** In the timeline below, “Day 1” is considered the first day of the main unit of instruction. The book selection process began 14 school days before the first day of instruction for the unit itself. The QAR Organizer refers to Appendix B for meeting #1 and #2 and Appendix C for meetings #3 and #4.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Day in unit</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Data Collected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3/31/15</td>
<td>-14</td>
<td>Introduce Unit</td>
<td>Reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/1/15</td>
<td>-13</td>
<td>Read memoir sample and discuss</td>
<td>Reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/3/15</td>
<td>-11</td>
<td>Book selection choice due</td>
<td>Reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/17/15</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>Acquire copy of memoir due</td>
<td>Reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/20/15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Permission Form, Model and Practice Critical Questions</td>
<td>Reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/21/15</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Continue Critical Question Practice with “Field Trip,”</td>
<td>Reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/22/15</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Meeting #1</td>
<td>Reflection, QAR Organizer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/23/15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Reading Day</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/27/15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Meeting #2</td>
<td>Reflection, QAR Organizer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/28/15-5/1/15</td>
<td>6-9</td>
<td>Work on personal memoir writing assignment (concurrent to literature circles.)</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/4/15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Meeting #3</td>
<td>Reflection, QAR Organizer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/5/15</td>
<td>11-12</td>
<td>Work on personal memoir writing assignment (concurrent to literature circles.)</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/7/15</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Meeting #4</td>
<td>Reflection, QAR Organizer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/8/15</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Reading Day</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/11/15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Meeting #5</td>
<td>Reflection, Group questions for “Shark Tank” activity.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Lesson Plans. For the instructional activities outlined below, I have paraphrased my lesson plans for brevity and clarity. Student reading days or days dedicated to concurrent writing projects are not included in lesson plans below. The lesson plans are reflective of my original notes as recorded for each lesson. Each class period is divided by lunch, so students have 15 minutes of class before lunch and 36 minutes of class after lunch.

The QAR Organizer was printed on yellow paper in order to differentiate it from the Quote Sheet, which was printed on green paper. Also, I relabeled the “Author and Me” questions as “Author and You” questions because it sounded more appropriate for high school students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Lesson Plan</th>
<th>Data Collected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-14</td>
<td><strong>Step 1: Explain Master’s Degree and Plan for Unit</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● The following notes summarize things I explained to the entire class. I told the students that...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ I am a student as well and working on my own project on being a better English teacher.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ I attend Hamline University and my “assignment” is to create a unit with a specific goal that will help me improve as a teacher.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ My goal for this unit is to see how we can use small book groups to teach high schoolers how to ask good questions. Good questions require problem solving, research and, most importantly, they can inspire discussion and even debate.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ I am relying on your help, and I am excited to have you give feedback and try your best.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
○ I am excited for you to be part of my journey as a Hamline student who is working on an important project that will help me become a better teacher.
○ At the end of this, you will all be better at asking and writing good questions!

Step 3: Explain memoirs
● The following notes summarize things I explained to the entire class:
  ○ A memoir is the story of a memory.
  ○ Full Class discussion question: Why do writers tell their story?
● For this full-class discussion, students wrote silently in their notebooks for a couple of minutes. Next, they shared with their table. After a few minutes of discussion, I asked each table to share their responses and put these responses in a list on the whiteboard. The most common answers were some variation of, “to help deal with something difficult” or “to teach others about this person’s experience.”

Step 2: Explain methods
● The following notes summarize things I explained to the entire class:
  ○ When given books to chose from, kids asked which book is the shortest. I usually say “it is the one you like the most.” With that mentality, I’d rather give you the opportunity to choose your own book. That means it might be harder to acquire the books; you might have to pay a few bucks or go to a local library.
  ○ I thought about group selection quite a bit and that I think you would prefer to work in groups by choice than forced groups because you’d be more willing to be open and have dialogue with people you know better.

Step 3: Model Book Selection
● The following notes summarize things I explained to the entire class:
  ○ The only requirements are that it be a memoir and it be at least appropriate for learners at the high school reading level.
  ■ Note: One student had a reading disability, but this student was extremely good at coping through executive function skills. I had a prior relationship with this student and knew that he/she was very capable of reading the level of text his/her group selected. I also let this student know that he/she could let me know if the text was too difficult. I also
offered to help find an audiobook version of the text, which this student did not need.

- I solicited from the students ideas for strategies to find books and ideas for searches; they suggested things like the library and Amazon.com. I pointed out a couple of features of these resources to aid in the students’ searches, but I did not direct the students to specific books.
- Then, in order to try out each tool, I also solicited ideas for searches. Students suggested topics and names of famous people. Students suggested musicians, artists, athletes and subjects that interested them like war, sports or travel. Using the projector, I modeled some searches for the class on the screen for the full class to see.
  - I suggested that students read reviews and check to see if audiobooks are available.
  - I encouraged students to write down any that looked appealing as I modeled the process.
  - Finally, students brainstormed ways to acquire copies of the book for low cost. They came up with the following ideas:
    - Library (I suggested that they could talk to a librarian about interlibrary loan),
    - Public library
    - Amazon.com used books
    - Kindle or other electronic copy

- I also explained to the students that, if there is a financial barrier to acquiring the book, even at a cost of five dollars, they could talk to me in confidence. I mentioned this every time I reminded the class about the upcoming due date to acquire the book.

**Step 4: Cover due dates**
- Put due dates and meeting dates outlined above on slide for students to write down in a planner or take a picture for future reference.

**Step 5: Give students time**
- For the last 15 minute of class, students formed groups and began searching for books.

- **Background:** Students had been using Tim O’Brien’s book *The Things They Carried* to explore truth in fiction and narrative forms. For this lesson, I gave them a segment of Tim O’Brien’s Memoir “If I Die in a Combat Zone” that has similar content to a story in his novel. Both segments were about the time in his life when O’Brien learned he had been drafted. Students were given time to read and discuss the two pieces of text.
  - Due at the end of class: Write a one-paragraph comparison of the two texts. Use these questions to guide your writing:
    - What do these two pieces of text have in common?
-11 | While students read *The Things They Carried* (from previous unit) in small groups, students reported book choices to me. The book choices were as follows.

- *Every Day I Fight* by Stuart Scott, Blue Rider Press, 2015. ESPN Anchor Stuart Scott’s story of his battle with cancer.


- *Lucky* by Alice Sebold, Scribner, 2009. The author’s “memoir of her rape at the age of eighteen.”

- *Dry* Augusten Burroughs, Picador, 2013. The author’s story of his fight and recovery from alcoholism.

- *A Long Way Gone* by Ishmael Beah, Sarah Crichton Books, 2007. “...story by a children’s-rights advocate recounts his experiences as a boy growing up in Sierra Leone in the 1990s, during one of the most brutal and violent civil wars in recent history.”

- *If You Survive* by George Wilson, Ballantine Books, 2010. “...first-person account of the making of a combat veteran, in the last, most violent months of World War II.”


- *Waiting to be Heard* by Amanda Knox, Harper, 2013. Story of the author’s four years in an Italian prison for the murder of her roommate, which she did not commit.


-1 | Over the two weeks between book selection and book acquisition, I reminded students every couple of days that they should be working on acquiring copies of their books.
• On this day, I went to each group, and each showed me a copy of the book or a receipt for an online purchase to prove that the book was on its way.

| 1 | **Step 1:** Introduce concept  
   • The lesson began with a slide that read, “The key to success...ask good questions.” I proceeded to explain to the students that in almost any career they will need to be able to ask good questions. Through observation and experience I have noticed that students seem most motivated when they perceive a direct correlation between school work and future jobs. The students then worked in small groups to create lists of questions that people would need to ask in a job of their choice. Each group then shared with the class.  
   **Step 2:**  
   • I handed out the QAR Handout (see Appendix D).  
   **Step 3:**  
   • I then modeled this kind of questioning with questions about *The Things They Carried* using the following examples.  
     ○ **Right There:**  
       ■ Where does Tim O’Brien live?  
       ■ What was his job before going to the war?  
       ■ When does this story take place?  
     ○ **Think & Search:**  
       ■ What are the themes in the text?  
       ■ What kind of person is Kiowa?  
       ■ What does Ted Lavender look like?  
     ○ **On Your Own:**  
       ■ Have you ever lied to yourself so much that it became the truth?  
       ■ When have you been brave?  
       ■ What is the best advice you have ever received?  
     ○ **Author and You:**  
       ■ Why did the author tell the story two ways?  
       ■ What was the most surprising part of the book? Why?  
       ■ If you could interview the author, what would you ask?  
   **Step 4:**  
   • Next, I gave students a list of questions to label on their own. The questions were as follows:  
     ○ What do you think it would be like to get drafted?  
     ○ What questions do you still have about Vietnam?  
     ○ Do you agree with Tim O’Brien’s statement about story truth vs. happening truth? |
- Which character had a Bible?
- How old was Tim O’Brien when he was drafted?
- How can you prove that the narrator was not brave?
- According to the book, what kinds of challenges did soldiers face in Vietnam?
- What do you think about learning about war in English AND history class?

| 2 | **Step 1:**
|   | - We began the day watching the short film *Lifted* by Pixar Animation. I chose this “text” because it is entertaining, accessible to students, but also vague enough in its storytelling style to inspire some questioning. After a second viewing, students wrote down questions of each of the four types and shared them with the class.
|   | **Step 2:**
|   | - Students read the story *Field Trip* from their copies of *The Things They Carried* and wrote down a question of each of the four types.

| 3 | **Meeting #1:**
|   | - I discussed reading planning methods with the class. I asked the students “what kinds of things will you consider when planning out your own homework?”
|   | - I also reminded them not just to divide the number of pages by days because it would be easier to finish chapters and plan around events outside of class.

Next, I put the following instructions on the board.
- Plan out reading schedule...consider chapter breaks, life outside of class. Do not just divide by number of pages automatically.
- On back of sheet, ask three questions you have about the cover, title or book in general. Things you are wondering about before you start.
- Read first 4 pages as a group, out loud.
- Fill out first QAR Organizer.

**DUE AT END OF CLASS:**
- QAR Organizer for first four pages of memoir.

| 4 | Students had time during the class period to read in groups or silently to themselves.

| 5 | **Meeting #2**
|   | Students came into class with their first quote sheet completed (printed on green paper). I made the first group meeting question sheet available so they could see their scores and feedback before completing the next one.
I took about 5 minutes here to talk to the full class about the concept of a “good question.” I referenced the Alan November talk that I had attended the previous week, and explained to them how the Internet changes knowledge. I told them that “people are rarely impressed if you can look something up online. Instead, they are impressed by problem solving and ability to understand other people and experiences. So today, make your questions non-Googleable.”

Instructions on board were as follows:

**Before Lunch:**
- Quotes out for grade check. (I checked the quote sheet (Appendix A) for completion.)
- Put all writing utensils away.
- Take 15 minutes to talk about your reactions, or even rant, about your text.

**After Lunch:**
- Revisit questions from meeting #1.
- Come up with QUALITY questions, discuss your answers and fill out QAR Organizer (printed on yellow) - *must be different writer than first day.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>10</th>
<th>Meeting #3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I took 5 minutes at the start of class to model critical questions. I emphasized the idea that a question should be “debatable.” In other words, if everybody agrees easily, it probably isn’t a very challenging question.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Before Lunch:**
- Quotes out for grade check. (I checked the quote sheet (Appendix A) for completion.)
- Put all writing utensils away.
- Take 15 minutes to talk about your reactions, or even rant, about your text.

**After Lunch:**
- Share quotes, pick a favorite - put that on front white board.
- Come up with QUALITY questions, discuss your answers and fill out QAR Organizer (printed on yellow) - *must be different writer than first day.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>13</th>
<th>Meeting #4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Before Lunch:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Meeting #5**

**Before Lunch:**
- Quotes out for grade check. (I checked the quote sheet (Appendix A) for completion.)
- Put all writing utensils away.
- Take 15 minutes to talk about your reactions, or even rant, about your text.

**After Lunch:**
- Come up with QUALITY questions, discuss your answers and fill out QAR Organizer (printed on yellow) - *must be different writer than first day.*

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**Meeting #6**

Instructions on the board were as follows:
- “On your own, write 3 quality Author and You questions and answer one of them. Nail this and we’ll be done with book meetings!”
- I provided the following questions stems on the board as well:
  - What if…
  - What do you think will happen…
  - What did the author mean by…
  - What did the character learn about…
  - Do you agree with…
  - Why did the main character…
  - What did they mean by…
  - How did she/he feel when…
Preview of Chapter Four.

Looking forward, Chapter Four will analyze data and reflections in conjunction with the lesson plans in order to reveal how self-directed literature circles were used to motivate tenth grade students in my English class to generate their own critical questions.
CHAPTER FOUR

Results

Over the course of a month during the spring of the 2014-2015 school year, in a tenth grade Literature/Writing class, 32 students participated in literature circles using memoirs as the basis for their discussions. The parents of 22 of the students signed permission letters granting specific permission for their children to participate in the study. All students participated in the class, and reflections about the entire class or data based on completely anonymous group work include all students. However, when analyzing individual student work for the final assessment, only students whose parents signed the permission forms were included in the write-up. The end goal of this study was to improve my teaching practice by decreasing teacher talk time and increasing student-centered discussion and use of critical questioning. Specifically, I used this study to answer the question: Can self-directed literature circles motivate tenth grade students in my English class to generate their own critical questions?

Data Collection

Over the course of the unit itself, I collected data in two primary ways. First, I responded to the reflection questions after each relevant class (see Appendix E). Second, I gathered the questions that students posed for each discussion as well as the scores that I assigned to each question. I graded the questions on a 5-10 scale. In general, I assigned a 10 to questions that were critical and met the definition of a “Think and Search” or “Author and You” question. I assigned a 5 to questions that were adequate in that they did ask a question, but were not critical or the type of question required. Scores in the 6-to-9 range were approaching expectations, but lacked depth and/or clarity. For example, questions like “How did Wozniak feel at HP?” or
“What did the character learn about cancer?” scored a 7 because they showed some curiosity but did not require in-depth discussion to answer. The percentages below are based on the total number of questions submitted on the QAR question organizer seen in Appendix C, independent of group.

I used my lesson plans to analyze how my instruction did or did not correspond to students’ responses. The chart below uses the lesson plans from Chapter Three for organizational purposes. After each lesson, I have included my data from the QAR organizers and my reflections.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Day in unit</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Data Collected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3/31/15</td>
<td>-14</td>
<td>Introduce Unit</td>
<td>Reflection</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reflection recorded 3/31/2015:

- Over the class period, the more I emphasized the searching process and the freedom it allowed, the students started to show signs of excitement. I noticed students talking to each other about ideas for books. And when I took an informal poll of the class, asking “would you rather choose from a list of books that you know are easy to get or from any book published, even if these books might be harder to get your hands on?” I saw a chorus of enthusiastic nods at the latter.

| 4/1/15 | -13       | Read memoir sample and discuss | Reflection |

Reflection recorded 4/1/15:

- When we conducted a comparison of Tim O’Brien’s work of fiction, *The Things They Carried* to his memoir, *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, students discovered much more personality, complexity and intrigue in the work of fiction.
### 4/3/15

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>-11</th>
<th>Book selection choice due</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Reflection recorded 4/3/15:**

- While continuing to work on previous unit, students shared their memoir choices with me. I asked each group to select two choices (a backup in case the first did not work.) All but one group successfully selected two memoirs, and I was able to tell them to go ahead and find their first choice.

- I expected more groups to have trouble finding or selecting books. I was thrilled to see so many select a book that I could approve. During the first day, I had shared with students that I mulled over the tension between books we have in the library for easy access and opening up the selection to anything and that I choose the more open ended choice for their benefit. This seems to have given students agency in the process of choosing which text they read for class.

- One group chose a book, *Heaven is for Real*, which I researched and found out that it had been written by a ghostwriter, so I told them to go with their backup choice. I felt it was important for this unit for groups to read books in which the author was more closely involved. Note: I learned later that *American Sniper* was also written by a ghost writer, as was *Waiting to be Heard*. In retrospect, I should have allowed either all or none of these texts as choices. I think allowing all, but spending time discussing the concept of a ghost writer with students, would have been ideal. However, one group member did not want to read the backup option. I told this group to take the weekend to think about it and that we’d try to come to a conclusion on Monday. I considered being the “bad guy” and telling that fourth member that he or she has to read the book.
Reflection recorded 4/6/15:

- I had a further conversation with the student who did not want to join the group. This student clarified that the graphic content in the book was difficult for him or her to read about. Up until this point, I had not known that this student’s reluctance was about more than just interest level. I asked another group, consisting of students who I know to be generally open-minded, if this student could join their group. They said yes and even had an extra copy of the book. On another positive note, the student who did not want to be in the first group was interested in the content of the new group’s book.

Reflection recorded 4/10/15:

- I checked in today on classes’ progress in finding copies of their books. Unfortunately, quite a few of the groups had not made any progress in finding their books. Two groups had made a plan to acquire a copy of their book for each student in the group and another had acquired half the copies, but the rest had barely started. Once I spoke to the groups individually and made a plan, more of them seemed motivated to go to the library or shop on Amazon. I also anticipated the financial aspect of acquiring a book to be an issue, but nobody has come to talk to me yet.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4/17/15</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>Acquire copy of memoir due</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/20/15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Hand out Permission Form, Model and Practice Critical Questions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reflection recorded 4/20:
• Most students seem to understand the concepts, but were fairly bored with the idea of the QAR strategy. I think the question label names felt a little immature and uninspiring to them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>Activity Description</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4/21/15</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Continue Critical Question Practice with “Field Trip”</td>
<td>Reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/22/15</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Meeting #1</td>
<td>Reflection, QAR Organizer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reflection recorded 4/22:

• The students seemed excited about making reading schedules since it was a departure from their usual forced reading schedules given to them. The independence and choice seems to be working pretty well. I liked hearing the kids read out loud from their books; they seemed to be engaged with the text and wondering where the stories would go.

Reflection recorded 4/26/15:

• Before opening the book, I asked students to ask three questions about the cover. 65 percent of the questions about the cover fit in the “Right There” description.
  ○ Are there more than 2 soldiers?
  ○ What kind of career does he have?
  ○ What does he do to make a difference?
  ○ Who is it about?
  ○ What is it about?
  ○ What kind of start is it?
○ Why is there a necklace?
○ How old is the boy?
○ Why is he carrying weapons?
○ What does the memoir take place?
○ Where are the soldiers?

● 35 percent of the questions about the cover fit in the “Think & Search” or “Author and You” description.

○ Why is he popular?
○ Why is the title “Lucky?”
○ Why is the cover foggy woods?
○ Why is the book named “Dry?”
○ Why is my title blurry?
○ Why is there a fish in a martini glass?

● I was concerned that student questions were not where I wanted them to be yet.

Grading the first round of discussion questions confirmed this. Only 17 percent of the questions about the first four pages that were supposed to be “Think & Search” or “Author and You” questions were successful and scored a 10.

● Examples of “Think & Search” questions that scored a 7 out of 10 or lower:

○ “What college was the narrator originally going to attend?” (Really a “Right There” question.)

○ “Who are the Sugarhill Gang, Rapper's Delight?” (Can be looked up too easily.)

○ “How far away was she moving away from home to study abroad? (Can be
looked up too easily.)

- Examples of “Author and You” questions that scored a 7 out of 10 or lower:
  - “What does it mean to be a technical engineer?” (Does not involve enough thinking beyond the text.)
  - “What can cancer do to you?” (Can be looked up too easily.)

- Example of “Think & Search” question that scored a 10 out of 10:
  - “What are his feelings on cancer?” (Requires multiple textual references and synthesis.)

- Example of “Author and You” question that scored a 10 out of 10:
  - “When Sonali’s parents were left behind in the Jeep's dust why didn’t she or her husband stop the Jeep and go back for them?” (Requires knowledge of morality and personal perspective.)
  - “Was she truly lucky?” (Requires a larger perspective on the world, philosophical discussion and personal perspective.)

- Based on these percentages, here is the plan for the next lesson.
  - I am going to re-model the kinds of questions, using student examples. I will use the “Truly Lucky” question as an example of a successful question.
  - Inspired by my notes from a 2015 keynote lecture by author and educator Alan November, I am going to talk to them about what “knowledge” is, using the example of how all doctors have the same knowledge, but the judgment calls and the tough questions are what make for a good doctor. Additionally, I will frame the discussion with questions that are “Googleable” or not.
○ I revised the QAR Organizer (see Appendix C).
  ■ I added a quote column and dropped the “How I found it” column. This should ground students in specific textual knowledge to support answers.
  ■ I also added a section for each student to respond to the “Author & You” questions. This was to further emphasize the debatable nature of good critical questions.

○ I added the requirement for tomorrow’s discussion that a different person be the writer. My thinking was that this forces the discussion to filter through a different student each day, forcing more group ownership and engagement. Without this, there is no doubt one student would usually be the writer in most groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>4/27/15</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>Meeting #2</th>
<th>Reflection, QAR Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Reflection recorded 4/27/15:

• Overall, this was a very successful day.

• The students seemed to really take to the idea about Googling questions. For many, the idea really stuck that a question whose answer can be looked up is not a very interesting question.

• I used one group’s question from the previous week as a sample of a good question and that group high-fived because I chose theirs. This showed investment and an eagerness to grow.
• During work time I heard students critiquing each others’ questions and struggling to think of good ones. Some were very proud when they did think of questions. I overheard one student saying, “What quote do we use if the answer is over the entire chapter?”

• Also during work time, I watched students struggle, but in a way that positively benefited their learning. I even caught myself resisting the urge to swoop in and “fix it”; when I stepped back and allowed the struggle, they found their way there.

• Some groups still seemed to struggle, and I have not read the responses yet, but overall this was an extremely positive step forward. And, not surprisingly, it came from a progression of modeling, practice, re-teaching, and student struggle.

• Many groups seemed genuinely excited about their books.
  ○ One group is genuinely excited to find out what happens next.
  ○ Another is angry about the contents of the story, but invested nonetheless, in Lucky, a book about a woman’s recovery and trial after a horrific rape.
  ○ One group found out the author of the book was gay, which shocked them at first, until they sort of embraced his sense of humor and seem to be getting attached to him as a character, despite their initial hesitation.

• 52 percent of questions graded received a score of 10, an increase over the previous meeting of 35 percent of questions submitted.

• Examples of “Think & Search” questions that scored a 7 out of 10 or lower:
  ○ “How many people were in their group?” (Requires very little searching.)

• Examples of “Author and You” questions that scored a 7 out of 10:
- If you could take 3 personal belongings... assuming you had time to? *(Too much of an “on your own” question.)*

- Example of “Think & Search” question that scored a 10 out of 10:
  - “What kind of person is Stuart Scott?” *(Requires multiple textual references and synthesis.)*

- Example of “Author and You” question that scored a 10 out of 10:
  - “Why does Augusten think drinking is not a problem?” *(Involves challenging assumptions and making inferences.)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4/28/15-5/1/15</td>
<td>6-9</td>
<td>Tenth grade testing meant about a quarter of class missing each day this week. Work on personal memoir writing assignment (concurrent to literature circles.)</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/4/15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Meeting #3</td>
<td>Reflection, QAR Organizer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reflection recorded 5/4:

- As students came in to class, it was apparent that a lot of kids clearly did not do the reading for the day. Many who did do the reading were reporting summaries to those who had not and about one third did not have assigned quotes completed.

- Despite the reflection above, they were engaged with the question discussion and one student, who is usually very removed from class, said, “Mr. Brook, we had a really good debate about this question!”
• Watching them struggle through the question sheet was a good sign. It seems like what I am asking them to do is actually challenging their thinking process and pushing past the obvious and easy questions they are used to.

• 85 percent received a 10.
  ○ For this meeting, every “Think & Search” question received a 10.
  ○ Examples of “Author and You” questions that scored a 5 out of 10:
    ■ What would you do if you had 5 minutes to live? (Too far removed from text. Really an “on your own” question.)
  ○ Example of “Think & Search” question that scored a 10 out of 10:
    ■ “What was the town like where she grew up?” (Requires multiple textual references and synthesis.)
  ○ Example of “Author and You” question that scored a 10 out of 10:
    ■ “Is George Wilson a good leader?” (Involves understanding of leadership and textual evidence.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5/5/15</td>
<td>11-12</td>
<td>Work on personal memoir writing assignment (concurrent to literature circles.)</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/7/15</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Meeting #4</td>
<td>Reflection, QAR Form</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

• 75 percent received a 10.

• I was a little apprehensive that students were getting fatigued of the pattern and would start to lose motivation to read or do the work in class.

• For the 15-minute discussion period today, very few kids were actually talking about the book; many were doing other things, on their phone or not talking. I think I need to
go back and model discussion skills and start knocking points for non-participation or something. But it seems as if the independence I have allowed is falling off the rails a bit. A couple of groups are participating, but many are losing that initial excitement.

- On a purely logistical note, a small but crucial mistake was labeling of the quote sheets. I should have given them all one big packet for all of them, with meeting numbers labeled. Now, quote sheet #4 is for meeting #5, so some kids are confused.

| 5/11/15 | 15 | Meeting #5 | Reflection, Group questions for “Shark Tank” activity. |

Reflection recorded 5/11/15:

- I was quite impressed with the questions they came up with for the shark tank activity. Although it did bring me to a realization: the group work means I do not have the assessment evidence that each student is learning the skills being taught. I think I will have a quiz or something, perhaps on Thursday, where each student will need to prove that they can do it independently before we decide if we can continue. I think I will put out the promise that if at least 80 percent can show they can develop good questions, then we will stop with group meetings and just give them the due date of finishing the book by Finals.

- The exercise completed during the 5th meeting was successful in reinvigorating the unit.

- These are the questions submitted by each group for the full class activity.
  - Why did they go back?
  - Was he effective under pressure?
○ How did she change?
○ What is more difficult for him, war or civilian life?
○ Will he remain sober?
○ Was he being a good parent?
○ Do her parents care more about her or her safety?
○ Should they give up hope?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>5/14/15</th>
<th>18</th>
<th>Meeting #6</th>
<th>Reflection, Individual Question Assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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</table>

- Only factored in students with signed permission forms
- 63 percent of students submitted a quality 10 question.
- The average score overall was 8.8.
- I still feel like a lot of students cannot get away from personal questions that start with “would you” that do not rely on the text enough. I am looking forward to letting kids just finish the books with no official assignment until the end. Of course, many will not, but for the ones that do I think it will be a rewarding experience.
- Question Stems were a big success. I did not want to use them initially in this unit because I thought it would restrict student critical thinking. However, they responded well and I feel like an average of 8.8 on the questions submitted is satisfactory.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>6/10/15</th>
<th>NA</th>
<th>End of School Year</th>
<th>Final Reflection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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</table>

- As the school year came to an end, students completed a final project for the last unit
of study for the school year. The assignment was to create a parallel story to Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*. Two groups used their memoir as inspiration for this project. This shows a level of engagement with the text that I did not know existed.

**Success by group.** Despite the overall success with the final assessment, some groups certainly struggled more than others to come up with critical questions. Below are the average scores for questions throughout the unit followed by my reflections about that group’s dynamic and discussion skills.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book Title</th>
<th>Average Question Score over first 5 meetings.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>iWoz</em></td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This group originally consisted of three students, but one dropped the course shortly into this unit. Of the remaining two, one had inconsistent attendance, leaving a solo group member. Obviously this group member was not able to discuss much. However, when I assigned him the task of writing and answering his own discussion questions, he was generally successful.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><em>Every Day I Fight</em></th>
<th>8.8</th>
</tr>
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</table>

This group tended to have a “do the minimum” mindset. They also ended with the most “Author and You” questions that were really “On My Own” questions. I did not see much discussion in this group beyond the minimum requirements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><em>If You Survive</em></th>
<th>8.8</th>
</tr>
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</table>

This group had a similar score to “Every Day I Fight” but were limited less by attitude and more by skill set. It was apparent that this group was used to reading that encourages literal
interpretations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>A Long Way Gone</strong></th>
<th>8.9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This group was extremely disengaged from discussion. I saw this group sitting in silence the most out of all of the groups. However, there was one group member who was asking critical questions, which helped support the remaining members. Very few were completing the assigned reading, as evidenced by the repetitive nature of their questions. This text is not at a high reading level, so the student motivation seems to be the deciding factor in how this group’s participation unfolded.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>American Sniper</strong></th>
<th>9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This group consisted of students who seemed to genuinely love learning and discussion. I saw the most innate sense of curiosity in this group. They asked the question, “What is more difficult for him, war or civilian life?”, which seemed to inspire a quality discussion.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Dry</strong></th>
<th>9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This group, similar to the American Sniper group, was quite engaged with the text. They did wander away to other discussions, but they seemed to have the most success in reading the text and letting that inspire discussion of alcoholism, recovery and the author’s personality. Perhaps the book’s high quality writing also helped with this focus as they seemed to really enjoy the writer’s personality more than most groups.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Waiting to be Heard</strong></th>
<th>9.3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This group struggled a bit with their social dynamic in that they were not always working all together. However, they still managed to come up with quality questions and discuss them in</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
an engaged manner. Their conversations were sometimes limited to three of the five members, but they usually regrouped for the next meeting. I intervened once after the second meeting to make sure they understood that it is their responsibility to include all members, but that was my only intervention.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lucky</th>
<th>9.53</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This group was probably the most overall successful. They had one group member whose natural impulse was to think critically, but this student was also an excellent leader, encouraging the other members to engage with the discussion. It probably helped that their text dealt with some intense topics that required processing afterwards.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wave</th>
<th>10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This group had a unique dynamic. Two students were completely disengaged, while one was clearly doing the reading and leading discussions as best as this student could. This student created all of the questions and was quite good at critical thinking. I noticed a few times when this student was able to lead his fellow group members to a quality discussion, but most of the time the others were not participating at all.</td>
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</table>

**Relationship between group factors and critical question success:** Group dynamics seemed to center around three main variables: the text chosen, skills of group members and investment with their own learning. Too little of any one of the above factors led to a group that struggled in completing the tasks.

In terms of texts, *Lucky, Dry* and *Waiting to be Heard* seemed to provide the most
opportunities for quality discussion. The groups that read these books found complex character development, interesting settings and moral quandaries to discuss. However, for example, *Every Day I Fight* seemed to present fewer of the settings or personal moral complexities of the author’s story, limiting the discussion to the student’s personal reactions. In terms of group skills, the groups that read *Wave* and *Lucky* had one very skilled group leader to drive the group dynamics. For each group, their leader asked questions and challenged group thinking. This, in combination with dynamic texts, led to some high-quality discussion, which was particularly notable with the *Wave* group because two group members were rather disengaged most of the time, with their leader pulling them in to discuss the moral dilemmas of the characters. Finally, student investment played a role in group success. The group that read *A Long Way Gone* was adept at meeting requirements by the end of the unit of study, but seemed to lack curiosity or motivation to engage in discussion. The group would probably require more specific coaching and attention to lead them to success over a longer period of time. They would have also benefited from a wider variety of tasks to inspire inquiry.

**Data analysis**

The following section will analyze the relationships among lesson plans, reflections and student work data.

**Relationship between lesson plans and reflection data.** The three areas in the unit where students showed the most enthusiasm and maintained engaged conversations for the longest were at the start of the unit, the second meeting and the fifth meeting. The commonality between these class sessions was that I challenged the students to complete a specific task. For the first meeting, it was the discussion of an independent literature circle, for the next it was finding
non-Googleable questions, and the third was to generate a critical question to present to the class for a vote. As the literature review emphasized, it is important to find a balance between teacher talk time and student meeting time. Walston (2006) offered the advice that I could have applied much more throughout the unit:

    Whether it be through the use of more “fish bowl” activities, direct instruction about the purpose and use of role sheets and response logs, or more in-depth whole-class discussions of what constitutes higher level thinking, it is vital that students have an understanding of the teacher’s expectations for literature circle discussions. (p. 81)

I did emphasize the debatable nature of good questions quite a bit, but I think a fish bowl activity would have been extremely beneficial. The peer pressure that came from presenting questions to the class for the “Shark Tank” activity would work well with group discussions. When students needed to demonstrate learning or skills in a public way, it seemed to increase their motivation to discuss the ideas in the book. I observed this same phenomenon with the speech classes I teach, where all assessments are formal presentations. Using the rest of the class as an audience for student work was successful with this “Shark Tank” activity and could have been applied more often.

    Additionally, more focus on refining discussion skills by modeling these skills for the entire class would have helped small group work. Each day, I could have used five minutes before lunch to review or model what a quality discussion looked like.

**Relationship between lesson plans and quantitative data**

    The data below summarizes the overall success rate students had with creating “Think & Search” or “Author and You” questions.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meeting #</th>
<th>Percent of Questions Scoring a 10</th>
<th>Average score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>17 percent (Group work.)</td>
<td>Average score of 7.54 (Group work.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>52 percent (Group work.)</td>
<td>Average score of 8.73 (Group work.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>85 percent (Group work.)</td>
<td>Average score of 9.64 (Group work.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>75 percent (Group work.)</td>
<td>Average score of 9.04 (Group work.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>63 percent (Individual work.)</td>
<td>Average score of 8.8 (Individual work.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These data above reinforce my reflections. During Meeting #3, after some extra modeling and direction, the students were most successful. They continued that success the following meeting, but due to fatigue with a repeated lesson plan, they lost some of that success from the meeting before. I did not collect the same kind of data for meeting #5, the “Shark Tank” activity, due to the nature of the exercise. But the questions each group presented were very good and all would have scored a 9 or 10 on the QAR sheet.

For a final summative assessment, students individually created “Author and You” questions. Despite the fact that the overall percentage of questions scoring a 10 went down, the average score of these questions was 8.8. I considered the above a success because it was a measure of independent work, which involves fewer minds than group work. With these individually generated questions, only one student truly missed the mark with his/her question. Fortunately, many of the questions that scored a 10 were thoughtfully constructed and showed innate curiosity. For example, one student, who read *American Sniper* asked, “Chris Kyle HATES the terrorists he fights in American Sniper, and wants them all dead, but what if had to fight different people, like Germans, Russians, or other people who are not terrorists? What if the
US was attacking someone? Would he feel differently if he had to kill them?” Another, who read *If You Survive*, asked, “Is George Wilson a good leader while under pressure?” A third student, who read *iWoz asked*, “Did Woz deserve the awards he was given?” The above are all debatable questions that can inspire high-quality discussion.

**Analysis of student questions**

The focus of this study was to encourage students to ask more critical questions. In this class critical questions were defined using the QAR strategy language “Think & Search” and “Author and You”. As initially expected, students’ least critical questions were either written with too narrow a focus, asking about a minute detail, or too broad, such as by asking about a general personal reaction without much specific textual evidence. Questions like, “What college was the narrator originally going to attend?” or “How far away was she moving away from home to study abroad?” required little to no critical thought because they could be looked up or found in one place in the text. I rarely found these questions in the “Think & Search” question spot on the QAR organizers. Much more commonly, I found “On Your Own” questions in the “Author and You” spot. And while these questions can require critical thought, they were removed from the text, and did not require the synthesis between previous knowledge and textual understanding that I was striving for. Questions like, “If you could take 3 personal belongings... assuming you had time to?” or “What would you do if you had 5 minutes to live?” did not require much textual knowledge, if any. While these questions were the types that students defaulted to when they could not come up with a successful “Think & Search” or “Author and You” question, they decreased as the unit progressed over the first three class meetings. Whenever I re-taught “Author and You” questions, I came back to the phrase, “Questions that inspire debate about the
text.” It seems as if the “inspire debate” portion worked, but “about the text” was difficult for students to apply.

Successful “Think & Search” questions were questions such as “What kind of person is Stuart Scott?” or “What was the town like where she grew up?” These questions often seemed to be trying to piece together a picture of a place or person. Some of the more successful “Author and You” questions were questions like “Is George Wilson a good leader?” or “Why does Augusten think drinking is not a problem?” These questions tend to be centered around morality, character quality or predictions. Again, my emphasis on the “debatable” nature of quality questions seemed to resonate with students, leading to the most successful questions during meeting #3 and meeting #5.

Overall, I noticed a pattern in terms of the focus of student questions. They generally asked questions about individuals and rarely about systems. The texts that students selected gave them opportunities to ask questions about systems such as recovery programs, the politics of civil war and colonialism, the military, and the justice system. However, such higher-level questions require background knowledge, but they also require a more critical mindset that does not seem generally present in my students because of factors such as their age and how they have been socialized. More specifically, many students seemed to assume that systems work and are fair and just, rather than ask questions to, as Freire would suggest, “respond to the concrete realities of their world” (Shaull, 2000, p. 30). I realized only after collecting the data that these were the kinds of questions I was hoping to inspire the most. Chapter Five will further explore how literature circles and classroom discussion in general can work to inspire students to break the “culture of silence” in which they live.
Preview of Chapter Five

Considering the patterns and relationships observed in the data, Chapter Five will consider the larger implications of this study. The conclusions include student choice of text and group selection, assignments, teacher modeling time and most importantly, overall success of literature circles as a tool to increase student generation of critical questions.
CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusions

As a teacher who believes in student-led discovery, but who is most comfortable with teacher-centered learning, I searched for ways to place students at the center of their own learning. Therefore, I designed a unit of study to explore the question: How can literature circles be used to teach tenth grade English students to generate their own critical questions? Daniels’ model of Literature Circles (1994), in conjunction with Raphael and Au’s (2005) Question-Answer Relationship strategy provided the baseline structure and learning target, respectively, for this unit. Students selected instructor-approved memoirs, chose their own groups and planned their own reading schedule. Then, meeting six times over the course of four weeks, they read their assigned books and tracked their questions and thinking with QAR organizers. Below, I will compare the results of the study to the literature review, draw general conclusions about the success of this unit, discussion its limitations and potential for improving my teaching practice with units like this in the future.

Implementation and Comparisons to the Literature

When reflecting on the unit of study, I compared my results with the studies cited in the literature review. Additionally, the results of my study indicate potential changes to implementation of a similar unit in the future and offer insights that could be of use to teachers who are interested in using a similar unit in their own classrooms.

Group Selection. Students had very little difficulty creating their groups at the initial stage of this unit. Despite the few issues noted in Chapter Four, the process itself overall went smoothly. However, some groups had more successful discussions than others. Concurring with
Maraccini (2011)’s and Walston (2006)’s observations, I now will prefer grouping my students by their interests over their abilities. In general, my students seemed more open to discussing bigger ideas from the text with peers who shared their interests. However, since students were allowed to work with their friends, they seemed to be less focused on the task at hand. Allowing students to form groups with their friends had the opposite effect of the “Shark Tank” activity. While it may require more work, in the future, I will most likely have students request groupmates and texts, and then use this information to craft the groups myself.

As mentioned in Chapter Four, I did not take advantage of the groups as a potential social motivator. In previous classes that I have taught, students became much more engaged in learning activities when groups have group names and more opportunities to share their learning with the entire class. While I would not make an entire literature circle unit a competition, I could do more to use dynamics between groups to inspire a classroom culture of reading and discussion. I could ask groups to create problems for other groups to solve, teach other groups about the world of their text, or even perform skits or make videos based on the ideas in their text. Any of these ideas above would likely create peer pressure to “perform” in a public way, which tends to bring groups together and motivate students.

**QAR organizer.** Instead of the role sheets traditionally used in literature circles (Daniels, 2006), this study used a Question-Answer Relationship organizer (see Appendix C) based on the work of Raphel and Au (2005). After students learned how to successfully create critical questions, it was difficult to turn this skill into a habit due to the fatigue students felt from doing the same assignment more than three times.
At times, I accidentally tapped into the teacher-centered mentality that I was ultimately trying to avoid. The QAR organizers used boxes, a naturally constraining organizational method, as a means to organize student thoughts, and despite their open-ended nature, students had little room for creativity when it came to the assignment itself. The restrictive nature of these assignments was evident in the feedback I gave as well. In an attempt to quantify the feedback in order to tap into the way most of my students respond strongly to numbers and grades, I ignored the advice of Walston (2006) that probing questions were more effective than quantitative scores for feedback. In order to create a system for simple grading and data collection, I ended up asking students to do something that I had decided they should do, which was turning the unit into more a teacher-led unit than intended. I noticed students starting to repeat questions and move more quickly through the sheets with little actual discussion. As evidenced by the success of the “shark tank” activity, students needed a variety of ways to apply a new thinking skill once they learned it. I had hoped that developments in the texts, things like plot revelations or new characters, would have done the trick, but again, I think the structure and tone of memoirs limited this inspiration.

Perhaps more opportunities for students to engage in real-world problem solving would inspire critical questioning. For example, in the future, I could ask students create an actual debate about the book, compare the events of the story to news reports or ask if the book’s message matches other texts on the same or a similar topic. I could also model this kind of thinking using alternative forms of fiction that the students already consume, like television shows. We could choose big ideas in the entertainment that they enjoy and set up “mini-debates” to analyze these pieces of text. After suggesting a few different activities like those explained
above, I could ask students to create their own activities based on the books, giving them a great
deal of choice. Real-world tasks such as the above would give structure to the lessons and inspire
critical questioning, but without the limitations of something that felt like a worksheet.

Another approach could be modeled after a system I have observed with one of my
colleagues. This colleague assigns discussions and grades them in pull-out groups, which could
work as another piece of a unit like this. This teacher assigns the rest of the class another text to
read in class while pulling out one literature circle to discuss the text with the teacher in
isolation. The students are required to bring questions to the discussion and are graded on their
textual references and discussion skills. This approach could easily be adjusted to include
assessment of students’ use of critical questions. I could assign grades based on the quality of the
questions the students bring to the discussion. And afterwards, the students could reflect on the
quality of the discussion that their questions inspired.

**QAR Language.** While the dichotomy explained by Rapael and Au (2005) between
“Right There versus Think & Search, and Author & Me versus On My Own” proved a successful
way to delineate critical questions from non-critical questions, the QAR strategy language was
not inspiring for students, for the reasons stated above (p. 209). In the future, I would use
different descriptors and headings. I would call “Think & Search” questions “non-Googleable
questions” and “Author and You” questions, “questions that inspire debates about the text.” The
vague nature of the QAR descriptors did not work out as well for my high school students as I
had expected. I believe that more direct names would aid in the students’ understanding of my
expectations.

**Unit Length.** With six meetings over four weeks, the unit seemed to be the appropriate
length of time for what I was seeking to accomplish. As data from the reflections and the student scores suggested, the students grew fatigued by the fourth meeting. With a greater variety of tasks, it is possible that the students would have felt less fatigued by the end. It is possible that we could have kept up meetings over the next few weeks, but not make the questioning task the primary focus. Perhaps I could have even limited the future meetings to half of a class period, and had these literature circle meetings occur less frequently, thus, increasing the weight and novelty of the literature circles. Perhaps it would have been beneficial to model the literature circles after the structure of adult book groups. Daniels (2006) explained that the intent of Literature Circles is that “we ask kids to do everything that real adult readers do” (p. 11). With this in mind, perhaps we ask students to read an entire text, or maybe half of a text, before meeting with their group. Using the “adult readers” mindset, it is easy to see that adults would probably grow fatigued of a worksheet, so it makes sense to see the same results in my students.

Text Selection. When the students chose their own texts, they showed a great deal of initial excitement, which supports Kennedy’s (2010) findings that choice “led to greater discussion about the plot and events the characters were going through” (p. 84). It appears that the process of students selecting a text that is interesting to them inspired enthusiasm for reading and encouraged a level of engagement that I do not usually see with full-class, teacher-selected texts.

One issue that arose was that of sensitive topics in texts. While I mentioned the sensitive nature of memoirs to the class during my initial modeling, I could have spent more time talking about these issues. I could have it explained it in a manner such as “when people write about life changing personal experiences, they often need to describe graphic events or deeply personal
pain, and that if the subject matter of the text is at all a concern for you, and you do not feel comfortable talking to your group about it, come talk to me.”

But most importantly, for the sake of this study’s goal, I do not think memoirs were the ideal type of text to allow students to choose. Some students struggled to find critical questions to ask because the texts tended to be written in very literal terms (unlike fiction, which tends to include more moral ambiguity and figurative language.) When we conducted a comparison of Tim O’Brien’s work of fiction, The Things They Carried to his memoir, If I Die in a Combat Zone, students discovered much more personality, complexity and intrigue in the work of fiction. These observations, plus my success in another class with student-generated questions with The Great Gatsby suggests that fiction might be a better tool to teach students to ask text-based critical questions. Additionally, many students reported that the texts were repetitive, with few plot developments, and thus made it difficult to generate critical questions. Works of fiction tends to have more nuance, bigger plot developments, more complex characters and fewer obvious ideas - thus lending themselves to better discussion of the type of questions I was looking for.

However, there are numerous other ways that memoirs could be used as part of an English curriculum, many involving other types of critical questions. Memoirs may work as a tool to teach students how to analyze an author’s point of view. We could discuss the subjectivity of all storytelling, even those that purport to be true. We could also discuss authorial voice or the effect of an outside writer helping the primary author write the story. Memoirs could even be used effectively as an independent reading texts with no in-class activity other than reading checks. Using memoirs as independent reading texts could be used to discuss more “On Your
“Own” style questions. Students could read the entire book and then reflect on their reading experience.

Another challenge that comes with reading memoirs in book groups is that they tend to require a great deal of background knowledge in order to ask a variety of critical questions. For example, the students who read *American Sniper*, when left to their own devices, did not ask many difficult political questions about the text. This is most likely because they did not have the previous knowledge in place to view it as a text with a point of view. Additionally, the book *Lucky* would also make for a valuable discussion around rape culture, the legal system or other social and political justice issues. Again, however, many students did not have the background knowledge to ask or even think of these questions.

To address most of the challenges listed above (the students’ lack of background knowledge, the students’ fatigue with repetitive stories and the students’ fatigue with repetitive activities) the most promising teaching strategy for a future unit with literature circles and memoirs would likely revolve around inquiry.

Using the “Inquiry Circles” work of Harvey and Daniels (2009) as a framework, students could create an initial real-world question to investigate throughout the unit. This question could be about the sociopolitical or historical context of their memoir. This framework would resolve many issues. It would create a natural forward momentum to the unit, something that the QAR Organizers did not provide. It would give students the background information that was lacking in their reading experience, allowing for more informed questioning. And finally, it could provide the foundation for connecting the personal stories of the books and personal reactions of the readers to the systems and institutions that make up their world. Real-world inquiry would
provide an authentic learning opportunity that still encourages the essential skills I aim to teach.

Even with that potential for inquiry, perhaps the reading list does need to be curated, to encourage the selection of books with the kind of writing and stories that inspire the students to work on the skills being taught. Indeed, the open-ended nature of text selection led to a great deal of initial enthusiasm, but in the end, using student-selected texts with teacher-driven activities did not work as well as I hoped. Perhaps the success of completely open student selection can be kept to independent rather than in-class projects, and literature circles could involve a little more curation from the teacher.

Limitations of this study

This study focused on one classroom in one school as a means to improve my own teaching practice. It is likely that the limited scope of the study limits its greater implications for practice. With variables such as the text selections, student groups and the chosen activities, it is difficult to fully conclude which of these factors should be adjusted in which ways for greater success. Beyond this classroom, variables such as academic level, school culture and grade level could all be unique to a specific classroom and school context.

Moreover, analyzing a range of quantitative data required consistent assignments from meeting to meeting, but the students’ fatigue with the QAR organizers seemed to have affected the results of this study in terms of the reliability of data collected. While using literature circles to increase measurable skills like comprehension could work well with a quantitative study, discussion quality could be observed with a more focused qualitative study.

Broader implications

Overall, I would say that this unit was a success, but has areas for improvement. This
study was consistent with the findings of Ferguson & Kern (2012) and Hillier (2004) in that students on the whole seemed to read more deeply and thoroughly in their groups. I could have spent more time, as Hillier (2004) suggested, on metacognitive skills around group dynamics, teaching students to reflect on how they function as members of a group. For example, students could spend more time researching group dynamics and interpersonal communication. Through this type of inquiry, students could identify their behavioral tendencies in groups and work to improve their skills within their assigned group.

Students had a number of high-quality discussions about their personal reactions to the text and more complex concepts like morality or character development. However, despite the fact that the “Author and You” and “Think & Search” questions that students asked were slightly more complex than the first group of “Right There” questions, they still, on the whole, did not show the depth of curiosity that I was hoping for.

The broader implication is that curiosity, student inquiry and student-centered learning need to start on day one of the school year and continue through the entire school year. Additionally, on a systemic level, students could develop curiosity and motivation over many months with various units of study all coordinated toward that goal. In this study, when students practiced asking critical questions within a limited window, it became too much of a school assignment, rather than a student-driven inquiry into the text and the greater world.

On a larger philosophical scale, I hope to inspire students to ask critical questions in order to break the “culture of silence” the leads to oppression and injustice in their world (Freire, 2000, p. 30). Perhaps the most useful realization from this study for me, personally, was that student-directed learning not only makes for more effective teaching, but could be used to
encourage and equip students “to know and respond to the concrete realities of their world.” My students mostly seem “'submerged’ in a situation in which such critical awareness and response [are] practically impossible.” In fact, the burden definitely lies on me, as a part of the “whole educational system” which is “one of the major instruments for the maintenance of this culture of silence” (Shaull, 2000, p. 30). In the future, the primary goal of my teaching in any situation that allows for it, will be to provide the tools and inspiration for students to have this level of critical awareness.

**Looking ahead**

When the next opportunity to use literature circles presents itself, I will most likely focus on group work more than a particular reading skill. The unit will include more variety in terms of tasks that I assign and more interaction between different groups to take advantage of peer pressure. I will still let groups make most of the choices involved in selecting texts and group members, but with a little more guidance from me. I was content with the amount of time I spent modeling and teaching concepts, and will continue to adjust my instruction according to the student work.

In terms of critical questions, I will continue through all of my teaching to focus on teaching students to ask questions that inspire discussion and debate. But perhaps the most important next step is to incorporate much more inquiry into a unit like the one conducted in this study. This would both give students choice and inspire curiosity.

Over the next school year in 2015-2016, I plan to share the results of this study with colleagues through both formal and informal conversations, which will be most applicable when I meet with colleagues who are also teaching this tenth grade course. I will share the discoveries
I made around student-generated critical questioning, literature circles and the potential for inquiry with memoirs in hopes of generating larger departmental conversations about how we can encourage students to have a more active role in their own learning.
APPENDIX A: LITERATURE CIRCLE PREP (Quote Sheet)

4 Quotes (Complete while you read)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meeting #:</th>
<th>Book:</th>
<th>Pages Read:</th>
<th>Grade:</th>
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As you read each section of your book, you will fill out one of these individually and show Mr. Brook at the start of class. Your preparation for discussions is based on this sheet.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quote (5 points)</th>
<th>Why is this quote important? What intangible idea does it reveal about the story, character or setting? Be detailed. (5 points)</th>
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APPENDIX B: QAR Organizer - First Version

5 Questions (Complete while you meet)

Meeting #: _________  Book: _____________  Pages Read: _____________

Grade: ___/40

Every time you meet, you will fill out one of these as a group and turn it in at the end of class. Your discussion grade as a group is based on this sheet. Your individual grade is based on your prepared quotes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of question</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>How we found the answer</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Right There ___/5</td>
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<tr>
<td>The answer is in one place in the book. Words in the question match words in the book.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Answers usually sound like this: “Found it!”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Think and Search ___/10</td>
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<tr>
<td>The answer is in the book, but you need to put it together. The answer comes from different places in the book.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Answers usually sound like this: “Hold on, let me check the other chapter.”</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>On My Own __/5</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>The answer is not in the book. I have to use what is already in my brain.</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Answers usually sound like this: “Well, I think...”</em></td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Author and You __/10</strong></th>
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<th><strong>Author and You __/10</strong></th>
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APPENDIX C: QAR Organizer - Second Version

5 Questions (Complete while you meet)

Meeting #: __________  Book: ___________  Pages Read: __________
Grade: ____/40

Every time you meet, you will fill out one of these as a group and turn it in at the end of class. Your discussion grade as a group is based on this sheet. Your individual grade is based on your prepared quotes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of question</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Detailed Answer</th>
<th>Quote that Supports Your Answer</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Right There ___/5</td>
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<tr>
<td>The answer is in one place in the book. Words in the question match words in the book. Answers usually sound like this: “Found it!”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Think and Search ___/10</td>
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<tr>
<td>The answer is in the book, but you need to put it together. The answer comes from different places in the book. Answers usually sound like this: “Hold on, let me check the other chapter.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>On My Own ___/5</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>The answer is not in the book. I have to use what is already in my brain.</td>
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</table>
**Author and You __/10**
The answer is not in the book. You need to think about what is already in your brain, what the book says and how these things relate.

*Answers usually sound like this:* "The book says ____, and I HAVE AN OPINION about this, which is...."

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<tr>
<th>Group Member ________ thinks:</th>
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**APPENDIX D: QAR Handout**

## KINDS OF QUESTIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kind</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Sample Answer</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Right There</strong></td>
<td>The answer is in one place in the book. Words in the question match words in the book.</td>
<td><em>Answers usually sound like this: “Found it!”</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Think and Search</strong></td>
<td>The answer is in the book, but you need to put it together. The answer comes from different places in the book.</td>
<td><em>Answers usually sound like this: “Hold on, let me check the other chapter.”</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>On Your Own</strong></td>
<td>The answer is not in the book. You have to use what is already in your brain.</td>
<td><em>Answers usually sound like this: “Well, I think...”</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Book and You

The answer is not in the book. You need to think about what is already in your brain, what the book says and how these things relate.

Answers usually sound like this:
"The book says _____ and I know _____, so THAT means..."
APPENDIX E: TEACHER REFLECTION

Date:

Briefly Describe Today’s Lesson:

How did you feel going into this lesson? What did you anticipate as problems or successes?

What was the general response from the students? Did very few, some or most of the students seem to be on board with the concepts?

How do you feel now? Ready to move forward? Apprehensive? Reflect on the lesson and look forward to next steps.
APPENDIX F: LETTER TO STUDENTS

Dear Students,

I am writing this letter to let you know about my master’s degree research project that will be conducted in your 5th hour English class this trimester.

My research project is really just a way for me to keep improving my teaching. You will do a unit that you would have done in this class anyway, but this just means I will keep track of how it goes and write a paper on it. In other words, nothing will be different for you.

You will be graded as normal on your required assignments, but your name and even the name of your school will be completely left out of my paper.

Why do I even need to tell you? Well, it is the right thing to do. It is important that when doing research, nobody is left feeling confused or lied to, so I am just letting you know.

I am also sending a letter home to your parents, they may choose to not have your work included in the study. If they make that choice, it will have no affect whatsoever on your grades in this class. If you have any questions or concerns, absolutely feel free to talk to me.

Thank you,

Mr. Brook

If you have additional concerns or questions about my performance as a researcher or this study that would you would like to be addressed confidentiality, you may contact Dr. Barbara Swanson, Advanced Degrees Department at Hamline School of Education, at bswanson@hamline.edu or 651-523-2813 or my advisor Rachel Endo at rendo01@hamline.edu.
APPENDIX G: LETTER TO PARENTS

Dear Parents and Guardians,

I am writing this letter to inform you about my master’s degree research project that I will be conducting in your student’s 5th hour English class this spring.

The central question of the research project is: Can self-directed literature circles motivate tenth grade students in my English class to generate their own critical questions?

What does this really mean? It means your student will choose a book in small groups and meet periodically to discuss these books. I will be studying their discussions to assess the most effective way to increase student’s use of critical thinking and questioning.

You should also know that as a graduate student at Hamline University, the research is public scholarship. The abstract and final product will be cataloged in Hamline’s Bush Library Digital Commons, a searchable electronic repository. Additionally, it may be published or used in other ways.

I understand the sensitive nature of this work and want to assure you that your student’s confidentiality will be fully protected. Not only have I received permission from the district but I also want to assure you that I understand the balance between being both a teacher and a researcher. This project is purely academic with the goal of improving my teaching practice. Students will be assessed and graded as normal and their participation in the study has no bearing on their grades or opportunities for learning. No names or identifiers will be included in the study.

If you choose to have your son or daughter opt out of the study, they will still participate in all normal classroom activities and assignments, but their work will not be included in the samples published.

Please return this letter and fill out the following in order to give permission for your son or daughter’s work to be included. If you do not return the form, he or she will be opted out:

I, ______________________ (your signature), the parent/guardian of ______________________,

give permission for this student to participate in the aforementioned study during Trimester 3 of the 2014/15 school year.

Thank you,

Damon Brook

If you have additional concerns or questions about my performance as a researcher or this study that would you would like to be addressed confidentially, you may contact Dr. Barbara Swanson, Advanced Degrees Department at Hamline School of Education, at bswanson@hamline.edu or 651-523-2813 or my advisor Rachel Endo at rendo01@hamline.edu.
APPENDIX I: DISTRICT APPROVAL

INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

Series Number: 801.9P, Adopted September 1990, Revised August 2009

Title: Request to Conduct Research in District

Name: Damon Brook
Phone: 651-303-5152
Email: damon.brook@district.org
Fax:

Address:

Title of research project: Masters of Arts in Teaching Capstone: Literature Circles

Research institution: Hamline University

School(s) or populations being studied: 10th Grade Class at

Anticipated beginning date: April 1, 2015
Ending date: April 30, 2015

On a separate sheet of paper, describe:
- Purpose of research;
- Planned use of results;
- Your qualifications;
- How the rights and privacy of human subjects will be protected;
- How the research will benefit District and/or will contribute to the advancement of education in general.

2. Attach all curriculum, forms, handouts, letters, etc. you plan to use in the study.

signature: ____________________________ date: __________

Request approved: X
Request denied: ____________ Date request received: ____________

Does this research require access to private identifiable student data? ☐ yes ☒ no

If yes, the study must be for the purposes of developing, validating, or administering predictive tests, administering student aid programs or improving instruction, and the researcher and the district must enter into an agreement pursuant to section 2.5 of 801.9AR. Use of Students, Employees and/or District Data for Research by completing page 2 of this procedure.

Rationale

signature: ____________________________ date: __________

c: Superintendent
Principal(s) affected
District director(s) affected
APPENDIX H: HUMAN SUBJECT COMMITTEE APPROVAL

HSC Approval

Speranza-Reeder, Mary to Damon, Endo

To: Damon Brook/9134691
From: Barbara Swanson
Date: 3-26-15
Re: HSC Approval

On behalf of the Human Subjects Committee, we are pleased to inform you that your application has been unconditionally approved and that you are now able to collect data related to your capstone.
Please accept our best wishes for the successful completion of your project.

Barbara Swanson, EdD
Chair, HSC Committee
School of Education
Hamline University
bswanson@hamline.edu
(651) 523-2813

Mary Speranza-Reeder
Program Administrator
School of Education
Office: (651) 523-2484
msperanzareeder01@hamline.edu

Follow me on Twitter! @msreeder101

www.hamline.edu

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