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The Implementation of Reading Circles in an Educator Preparation Program Course

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Abstract

This study examined the effectiveness of the implementation of reading circles along with a wiki in an undergraduate special education methods course as a way to increase understanding and retention of course content. Reading circles offered a direct way to encourage reading of course content. In addition, the use of the wiki allowed the students to construct, discuss, revise, and fine-tune their understandings and interpretations of assigned readings. Both the reading circles and the wiki emphasized collaboration through an ongoing process and, as such, complemented each other in very powerful ways. The results of this study support the implementation of reading circles that utilize technology to teach course content in educator preparation courses. This study describes the implementation of an appropriate and effective teaching method that could be used in many higher education courses.

In many college courses, assigned course readings may be seen as a menial task to students. As college students, they may not realize that assigned course readings are instrumental in their understanding of course topics. Some students may not set time aside to complete the assigned readings. Other students may feel that the reading assignments are not important since they may not be tested over the specific content. In some cases, students may lack the reading comprehension skills to analyze the reading material successfully. Rasinski et al. (2016) found that both word recognition accuracy and word recognition automaticity continue to be important factors for students to be college ready. Rasinski et al. (2016) also reports in reference to reading that there appears to be a gap in knowledge of rate norms or indicators for the secondary and college levels. The results of their study suggest that both word recognition accuracy and automaticity continue to be important factors for reading and academic success into

the middle, secondary, and postsecondary grades. Gorzycki, Howard, Allen, Desa, and Rosegard (2016) found in a study of 848 undergraduates that students do not necessarily improve their reading as they progress toward college graduation and that many students struggle with a common set of reading tasks across all class levels.

According to National Center for Educational Statistics (2017), only 38% of high school seniors scored at or above grade level in reading, and one-quarter of high school seniors are reading below grade level. Neither research nor established practice provides tangible activities that support reading and connect it to writing in most college classes. This research documents the implementation of a structured, scaffolded, low-stakes reading activity that supports students' understanding of course content. The practices implemented during this study also held students accountable for completing

assigned readings in a college course, while encouraging collaboration among students.

The National Survey of Student Engagement (2013) revealed that only 24% of university students completed course reading assignments consistently. Instructors of college students often find that students came to class without having completed out of class assigned readings. It can be challenging for an instructor to hold students accountable for assigned course readings as there may not be a way to assess that all students have completed the assigned readings. Students may not realize that the lack of participation in completing reading assignments hinders not only their own progress, but the progress of the entire class. Kerr and Frese (2017) found that well-structured cooperative learning activities with clear agendas not only engaged students but also allowed the instructor to witness how students are synthesizing new information.

This study used a survey research design method to determine if the implementation of reading circles along with the wiki supported college students in completing assigned course readings. In this study, reading circles were implemented as a student-centered and collaborative approach to completing reading assignments. The implementation of reading circles offered special education teacher candidates a strategy for navigating a text, initiating textual discussions, deepening comprehension of text, making connections to readings, and expanding the understanding of course material. This study also provided a model for teacher candidates to learn about the importance of helping their own future students become accountable for readings and discussions (Kerr & Frese, 2017).

For some college students, comprehension is an area that is a weakness.

Ari's (2015) findings show word reading processes continue to determine reading comprehension success in college-age adults. Many college students may not understand or be aware of their own reading deficiencies, which ultimately may affect their own comprehension of the written word. This study was designed to help establish best practices for engaging students fully in reading assignments and in meaningful classroom discussion that promoted critical thinking. Many students tend to read by skimming the text and looking for facts that could be memorized, which does not lend itself to critical analysis of complex ideas (Linderholm, 2006).

When it comes to reading, some students may have weak metacognitive skills. This situation is true particularly when students must read about an unfamiliar topic, which happens frequently in college. Many students, no matter what their previous educational experiences, can improve in reading. There are many strategies that a college instructor may choose to use to help students improve their reading skills; however, the use of the reading circles as implemented in this study may be an effective strategy to help develop critical thinkers that can dissect information, which they have read and improve their comprehension of written material.

Critical reading is a decision-making process. It requires that the reader ask many questions while he reads. When someone reads critically, he notices not only what is written but how it is written. All authors have a purpose when they write. One of the hallmarks of college learning is asking questions. Unlike high school, where the focus is on learning facts, college students often ask questions and explore new ideas. Critical readers ask many questions as they read. Reading circles, along with a wiki, can

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be an engaging way for students to prepare for class and understand course content as it allows students to acquire a better understanding of the purpose of reading and the metacognition that takes place during reading.

Reading circles can be used to initiate textual discussions and deepening comprehension of and connection to reading content. The reading, thinking, and discussions generated by reading circles may possibly help develop independent study skills, and confidence as a reader and a member of a community. This research documents the implementation of structured reading circles as a model for helping students engage in and experience reading as a process that supports and complements understanding key content knowledge. The purpose of this research was to determine if the implementation of reading circles along with the use of the wiki supported college students in completing assigned course readings. This research explored students' engagement and experiences toward the use of reading circles as a classroom learning and discussion format. Implementation of reading circles with the integration of technology to teach course content may be used as an effective method to help special education teacher candidates to attain knowledge and skills needed as a professional educator.

There has been a shortage of empirical studies on the effectiveness of efforts to improve the reading skills of teacher candidates before they become teachers. In addition to helping the teacher candidates attain a better understanding of the course content, the current study provides evidence on the potential efficacy of using the reading circle approach in helping students develop their own reading skills.

Literature Circles Redefined

Literature circles became well known in the education world when Harvey Daniels (1994) published *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom*. Daniels republished his book in 2002 with a few revisions. One of the key features of Daniels' book was that the classrooms should have student-directed discussions. Harvey Daniels' literature circles have evolved over time, and they offered a model for helping students engage in and experience reading as a process that supports and complements writing. The ultimate goal of literature circles is to have students lead their own learning, which allows them to be more motivated and engaged learners (Marchiando, 2013; Mills & Jennings, 2011).

The implementation of reading circles was based on the literature circles framework developed by Daniels (2002); however, for this study, the circles were modified to be used with expository text for special education teacher candidates. The participants in this study were not members of a *literature circle* but were identified as participants in a *reading circle*. The reading circles were implemented to help increase the knowledge and skills related to teaching special education. For nearly 25 years, educators around the globe have used literature circles to promote active learning and critical thinking through classroom discussion (Daniels & Harvey, 2009). This research study examined the use of reading circles to promote important reading and comprehension of students in a college course.

As Richardson (2006) says of online publishing tools like blogs and wikis, "We can now offer our students a totally new way of looking at the work they do. . . It's not

meant to be discarded or stored in a folder somewhere; it's meant to be added to the conversation and potentially used to teach others" (p.132). In this study, students were asked to read about specific topics related to special education, then respond through technology and face-to-face interaction. Literature circles include small, student-led discussion groups in which members read the same book. The same type of discussion took place during the reading circles; however, the name, Literature Circles, was not appropriate as the students were not studying literature but rather reading and discussing professional journal articles.

Roles

At the core of effective discussion is collaboration. Collaboration allows students to retain knowledge because it allow students to speak and write about their thoughts. Hathaway (2011) believes that one of the strengths of literature circles is that they provide rich opportunities for complex learning without requiring expensive technology or even a full classroom set of a novel; however, the essential parts of the process can easily be translatable to web-based learning such as with a wiki.

Students were asked to collaborate and participate in reading circles while enrolled in a special education methods course. Daniels' (2002) literature circles include assigned roles for each student and so did the reading circles. The role sheets provided each student with a different role for each week. Students had to complete their assigned roles outside of the class, but, when they returned to class, they were asked to discuss what they had read and complete a task associated with their assigned role. All group members were responsible for preparing for and contributing to class discussions. Each role had a different

learning task to complete, but the tasks were meant to help students deepen their knowledge and connections to the course content. By having an assigned role to help develop understanding, the students appeared motivated to go further in-depth with their preparations and readings for class than just skimming the text. For this study, each reading circle had four to six roles; however, this number could be modified according to the number of students in the class. The role assignments were based on the original role sheets used by Daniels (2002), but they were modified from Daniels' original version so that the responsibilities were aligned to expository text and college age levels.

The assigned roles are in Table 1 and were Discussion Director, Connector Detector, Word Worm, Illustrator, Prominent Point Person, and Discussion Debriefier. Students were asked to read a different preselected peer-reviewed journal article that informed them about topics in special education. Each student was assigned a different role each week. The number of roles could depend on the number of students in the class. Each role and responsibilities of the role are described below.

The written work assigned with the reading circle was to be completed outside of class and course time was used by the weekly "Discussion Director" to facilitate group dialogue about the reading, to discuss any questions or confront any difficulties with the text, and to engage in collaborative textual analysis activities. In order to ensure that the reading circles were collaborative and effective, expectations for student led discussions were covered before the implementation of the reading circles. This included being prepared, staying on topic, and including everyone in the discussions. Each student was given responsibility at least

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Table 1

Reading Circle Roles and Responsibilities

Weekly Role	Responsibilities
Discussion Director	The discussion leader is responsible for creating and posting a PowerPoint presentation which concludes with a few open-ended questions before the reading circle meeting. The discussion director will then lead the discussion for the weekly meeting.
Connector Detector	The Connector Detector main function is to identify personal connections to the text. These connections can be text-to-text, text-to-movie, and text-to-text experiences. The Connector Director will post these connections on the wiki under the Connections topic. The Connector Director will find connections between the circle's reading and the world outside, which includes connecting the reading to your own life, to happenings at school or in the community, to similar events at other times and places, or to other people or problems that you are reminded.
Word Worm	The Word Worm will identify unknown or intriguing vocabulary within the text. The Word Worm will then post these words with the definitions on the wiki under the Word Worm topic.
Illustrator	The job of the illustrator is to draw a picture related to the reading. It can be a sketch, cartoon, diagram, flow chart, or stick-figure scene. The illustrator can draw a picture of something that reading reminded him or her of anything that conveys any idea or feeling you he or she got from the reading. Any kind of drawing or graphic is okay, and he or she can even label things with words if that helps. Then, the Illustrator will take a snapshot or scan the picture and upload it to the wiki to share with all group members.
Prominent Point Person	The Prominent Point Person's job is to locate a few special sections of the text that the group might like to hear read aloud. The idea is to help people remember some interesting, powerful, funny, puzzling, or important sections of the text. The Prominent Point Person will decide which passages are worth hearing, and jot plans for how they should be shared. The Prominent Point Person can ask students to read passages aloud to themselves, ask someone else to read them, or have people read them silently and then discuss. The Prominent Point Person will post these passages (minimum of 4) to the wiki before class.
Discussion Debrief	The job of the Discussion Debrief is to take notes during the discussion. This student will take notes and post the note to the wiki after the reading circle meeting for that week.

once to be the Discussion Director and lead at least one 25 to 30-minute group discussion.

Reading circle members met online using a wiki application for 8 weeks of the 16-week semester. Members would respond

and complete role assignment for the week. Each week the students would meet in their reading circle during class time. The discussions and learning were very student centered. Learners were responsible for reading and comprehending the materials they were asked to read for the week before the class meeting. Members came to the weekly meetings prepared to share discuss key points and issues of the articles. Each meeting was led by students. The students were assessed by their completed wiki assignments and participation in the reading circle.

Technology

In education, there is a need to connect technology with traditional modes of instruction, such as reading circles. It is imperative that future teachers be proficient with the use of technology. One way to help prepare teacher candidates use technology is to include it as part of class assignments. Combining wiki technology with the reading circle becomes especially powerful and beneficial because the wiki fulfills many assessment needs by supplying documentation of each participant's work. Ramanair, Rethinasamy, and Jecky (2017) report that the use of technology offers much potential to language pedagogy. In particular, the use of wiki, which is part of Web 2.0 technology, is often recommended as a tool to support students' writing activities. In the study by Ramanair et al. (2017), the use of a wiki enabled the group members to interact. They also reported a sense of satisfaction with the use of the wiki in supporting academic writing.

Wikis are a digital forum for collaborative authorship in which any member granted access can add or change content and are typically organized by topic, which makes them more dynamic and easier

for readers to browse (Boulos, Maramba, & Wheeler, 2006). Wikis also actively involve learners in their own construction of knowledge (Boulos et al., 2006). One of the great advantages to the wiki use that it is very user-friendly and easy to use. Students need little more than a five-minute tutorial to learn their way around a wiki. Using the wiki as a platform to submit the work before class so that all members of the reading circle could view helped to hold students accountable for their readings and assignments.

Reading circle members collaborated online using a wiki application for 8 weeks of the semester. Participants would respond and complete role assignments weekly on the wiki. After posting their assignment for the week to the wiki, each student would meet in their reading circle during class time.

Journal Articles

The journal articles topics that were chosen for students to read were related to the field of special education. Topics included interventions for students with learning disabilities, the history of special education, retention of elementary grade students, how to work with students from diverse cultures, strategies to teach math to exceptional children, and collaboration.

For this study, expository texts were chosen as the genre of study. Expository texts identify and characterize phenomena. They include text forms, such as definitions, explications, summaries and many types of essay. Expository texts may be subjective, objective, analytical, or synthetic and are characterized by state verbs and epistemic modals or by verbs indicating typical activities or qualities.

Some might propose that a student who is a proficient reader of literature will, in

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turn, be a proficient reader of expository texts. Expository texts are a combination of writing and reading instruction where it is necessary for students to become aware of the informational text structures. Although some would advocate that students that are in their junior year of college and are in a training program for teachers should be able to successfully use the skills needed to navigate expository text, which is not necessarily always the case.

Research Question

This research attempted to answer the following question: Does implementation of reading circles, along with the wiki, support college students in completing and understanding assigned course readings?

Sample

Participants in the study varied in age from 22 to 45. The students had the undergraduate classification of junior. Participants were special education teacher education candidates in a special education methods course. Students were provided information about the study and students were informed that their participation was not mandatory and the choice to participate or not would not impact their course experiences or grades. All students from the course who agreed to participate were included in the study. Reading circles were implemented for two semesters for this study, once in the fall semester and once in the spring semester. There were 14 participants in the study. Participation in the reading circles was part of the required class assignments; however, participation on the anonymous surveys was not.

Method

This investigation was conducted in a special education content course at a small public college in the southeast United States, and approved by its Institutional Review Board (IRB). Before the reading circles were implemented, the opportunity to participate in a brief pre-survey about the use of reading circles and the use of the wiki was announced to the students. An informed consent statement was contained within the pre-survey introduction. The consent statement indicated that the purpose of the research was to understand the usefulness of the reading circle activities in assisting student learning, and participation was voluntary and anonymous. The consent statement also indicated that no grade or other remuneration would be given for participating and that the individual would give consent to participate by completing the anonymous survey.

After the reading circle activities had concluded for the semester, the same procedures were followed for administration of the post-survey. Students were informed that participation was voluntary and anonymous.

Data Collection Procedures

The instruments used in this research included an anonymous pre-survey and post-survey created by the researcher. The surveys were composed of Likert-type scale questions and open-ended questions. The surveys contained questions that accurately measured the opinions, experiences, and engagement of the participants before and after the reading circles were implemented.

After students signed the informed consent, they were given a link to the online pre-survey to complete in order to evaluate their past experience and knowledge with

reading circles before the implementation of the reading circles. Participants were asked to complete the online survey at a time and place that was convenient for them. All submissions were anonymous.

The pre-survey contained 4 questions. At the end of the semester, the post-survey was administered. It contained 22 questions. This survey investigated the college student perceptions' related to course readings and classroom discussions after the implementation of reading circles and wikis and how reading circle communities influenced students' overall learning.

Results and Discussion

The pre-survey indicated the students were not familiar with reading circles or the use of the wiki before class implementation. None of the students had ever been included in a reading circle or a wiki assignment before this learning assignment. After students completed the reading circle activities, the post-survey was completed by the students, and the results were analyzed. The post-surveys demonstrated that the implementation of reading circles in the classroom facilitated student participation, as students worked together to mediate meaning and discussed what they felt was important about the assigned reading. Students consistently felt that the design of the project motivated them to complete the readings and assignments. The results of key findings of the post-assessment survey are as follows:

Table 2

Enjoyed Reading Circles

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
29%	59%	0%	12%	0%

Responses to question one from the survey indicated students were excited to have the opportunity to use class time to discuss topics in special education. (See Table 2.) The majority of the students enjoyed participation in the reading circles.

Table 3

Understood Course Content

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
46%	25%	22%	7%	0%

Results from survey question two indicated that while a few students were neutral on whether the reading circles helped them to better understand course content, the majority of students in both classes agreed that the implementation of the reading circles and the wiki were helpful in understanding course content. (See Table 3.)

Table 4

Different Perspectives

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
59%	34%	7%	0%	0%

Results from survey question number three indicated that participation in the discussions caused students to have different perspectives on the topics that they had not previously thought. (See Table 4.)

Table 5

Community in the Classroom

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
12.5%	75%	12.5%	0%	0%

Survey question four determined that the majority of students in both classes agreed and/or strongly agreed that the implementation of reading circles along with

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the wiki increased the sense of community in the classroom. (See Table 5.)

The survey included two open-ended questions. Fourteen students responded to the questions. Student feedback from these questions was also overwhelmingly positive.

The first question was “Identify what you liked best about reading circles” and had the following comments. One student said, “I liked that everyone felt obligated to do their work. Everyone needed to have their work done. If a student did not do their work, the discussions that take place would be difficult.” Another student said,

I enjoy getting to collaborate with my group and hear the different ideas and thoughts they took away from the reading. I love how each week someone has something different that they are doing and have to complete for the reading circle because it allows each person to look for something different and read the reading prompt differently.

One student commented, “I think that the reading circles encouraged a communal feeling among the class. Each person had a specific role to engage in. The reading circles allowed for a group discussion about serious topics regarding special education.” A fourth student said,

I liked the jigsaw effect that the reading circles had. I felt that even though we each had to read the article, we all were able to break down the tasks and made all of the content easier to understand when we all collaborated. Some of the articles were more difficult and cumbersome than others, and being able to break those down into different tasks helped me immensely. I also enjoyed the sense of community that the reading circles provided because I felt that we

all were a part of this discussion as equals. Furthermore, I felt that we were all held accountable for completing the reading as well as our tasks in order to ensure that our weekly reading circle went smoothly.

Another student commented, “I liked how it allowed variety to the articles and readings that we did. It gave everyone and every type of learner a way of taking in the information and understanding what it was about.” All student comments were similar to the ones above and were positive.

The second question was “Identify what you liked least about reading circles.” One student commented, “I liked the content we specifically read about. As a future educator, I felt that it was very beneficial.” Another student said, “I really do not have a negative opinion about the reading circles.” A third comment was,

I would sometimes forget about the reading circle, and a couple of times had to scramble to get it read. I also find research articles difficult to read at times, due to the scientific language and tend to lose interest in those type of articles easier than other genres of reading.

Another said, “I did not like doing it every week, but I do understand that in a real classroom scenario, this is not something I would use on a weekly or daily bases.” All of the comments were very similar to these quotations. Two students did indicate that they found the articles difficult to read at times.

Conclusion

Findings indicate that students not only found the reading circles enjoyable, they thought the reading circles helped them understand the course content and held them accountable for class reading assignments.

Reading articles and discussing them with assigned roles helped to create a community of collaboration among the students. The majority of the students agreed that reading circles engaged them in rich conversations about the shared readings on important topics in their field of study. Students were able to express their opinions, predictions, and questions about a concept or topic in a productive, structured way. Students took on specific group roles, which were designed to develop reading, speaking, and thinking abilities. As the students became more skilled in reading circle conversations, they moved beyond specific role assignments. Student responses indicated that reading circles helped deepen students' understanding of concepts or topics. They also helped to provide routine and structure to the higher education classroom. In this study, the students also used technology to collaborate, which was beneficial to the participants as future teachers. The student-centered approach of both the reading circle and the wiki gave students a sense of investment and ownership that few other pedagogies allow. Special attention was paid to the use of reading circles to promote student participation, both orally and in written form, as well as in discussions of topics relevant to students. The implementation of reading circles in the classroom facilitated student participation, as students worked together to mediate meaning and discuss what they felt was important about the assigned readings. Selection of a text where content tapped into students' knowledge and field of study promoted classroom participation about topics and issues relevant to their chosen profession.

Using reading circles and the wiki was a very effective way to help students understand the content in a special education methods course. Reading circles were modeled after the work of Harvey Daniels

(1994, 2002) and his Literature Circles; however, these circles were modified to work for students in higher education and to incorporate the use of technology. Using technology benefited all students by allowing them to have immediate access to the work of their peers. By sharing their work through technology, it increased the motivation of the students to post and respond effectively.

The implementation of reading circles in higher education may help to create in students an appreciation of the value of reading, and help the students develop skills for interpreting what they read. It also helps students communicate their ideas about that reading to others. The student-centered approach of both the reading circle and the wiki may give students a sense of investment and ownership in their own learning. The use of the reading circle was effective in helping students better understand course content and discuss it in face-to-face classes in a structured, supportive learning environment.

Implications

Ari (2016) reports that guidance in improving the word reading skills of developmental readers is mostly limited to findings from intervention studies conducted with young readers. In a similar project with high school students, Edmondson (2012) reported that with the project teachers realized how much students can accomplish without micromanaging student efforts. The use of reading circles, along with the wiki, offered the students a supportive, collaborative workgroup where the students were helped to create a community of intrinsically motivated readers and writers encouraged by their sense of duty and responsibility to each other.

A great deal remains to be learned about how to improve the reading skills of

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college students and how to better prepare future teachers. The current study may help to identify a teaching strategy that can be implemented in higher education that will hold students responsible for their assigned course readings, while utilizing technology to help build a positive classroom environment. The incorporation of reading circles in a methods teaching course is an effective way to engage students in completing assigned readings while supporting those that may struggle with reading.

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