Book Study Suggestions

Writing Circles: Kids Revolutionize Workshop

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A *Writing Circles* study group offers opportunities to:

- Read, question, discuss, adapt, apply, and reflect on the ideas from *Writing Circles.*
- Participate in a writing circle and experience the approach.
- Plan and problem-solve with colleagues who have started or want to start writing circles with their students.

There are as many ways to structure a study group as there are site specific variables, like amount of meeting time available and frequency of meetings. Regardless of these variations, key to success is a welcoming climate in which you feel free and safe to participate in the ongoing conversation and exchange of ideas—not to mention writing. This is the same kind of learning community we strive for in writing circles with kids.

Two principles of the National Writing Project inform the *Writing Circle* study groups we've been part of. The first is that teachers are the best teachers of teachers. The second is that we truly learn by doing. "Teachers teaching teachers" honors the professionalism, judgment, and good will of teachers. Regardless of grade level or content area, all teachers are united in the same goal as writing circles: improved student writing. We trust teachers to take away from the group session what they see as useful and valuable and adapt and evaluate strategies from their unique perspectives. This means that we don't just want to talk about ideas, we want to try them out ourselves, both in the study group and in our own classrooms. This kind of first-hand knowledge allows for deeper understanding and conversation as we talk about how to implement writing circles with students of any age.

As you plan your book study, here are a few other things that can help make the experience more engaging and meaningful.

Form a Diverse Group: Circumstances permitting, encourage teachers from different grade levels and content specialties to participate. Such diversity deepens conversation, increases understanding, and creates a common language across grades, buildings, and even districts.

Watch Group Size: A good number for individual writing circles is 4–6 participants, and that's also a good size for lively democratic discussions. If you have a larger base group, split the time between smaller writing circle groups and larger whole group discussion and decision-making.

Design a Recurrent Format: One way to organize recurrent book study meetings would be to design a format to reflect the principles and approaches described in the book:

- An opening Building Community activity.
- Conversation about the book based on reading and chapter questions/suggestions.
- Conversation about classroom writing instruction as seen through the chapters of the book—including time for teachers who have started writing circles in their classrooms to share their observations about the process.
- Form writing circles. Writing circles meet for the first time as part of the discussion of Chapter 3, and then continue to meet for at least 20 minutes as part of each subsequent book study session.
- Closure. End each book study on time, but not before plans and expectations for the next meeting are clear—including schedule, reading, writing circle drafts, and classroom applications.

Study Questions/Suggestions: Are simply that—not a curriculum. The best study questions are yours. Questions/suggestions are meant to trigger additional questions/suggestions and launch conversation. Here are some ways of using the questions:

- Place 3 or 4 of the suggested questions in an envelope and randomly pull them out for discussion.
- Jot down one "burning question" (Chapter 7, p. 95) based on your reading and bring it to the book study meeting. Collect these "burning questions" and make the envelope-draw from them.

- Start with one big question that comes from the Agenda Building (see next idea).

Create an Agenda: Prior or during the first book study meeting, list what you hope to gain from being in *this* study group. Combine agenda items and prioritize. Eliciting an agenda obligates the group to follow up on it. Take one agenda item at a time, and let it frame the conversation.

Encourage Text Annotation and Use of a Writing Circle Notebook: Annotate sections of the book you want to talk about. You can do this by underlining, highlighting, making marginal comments—as long as you own your book. If you're using a borrowed copy, model what it might be like to read books from the classroom library by using sticky-notes for the same purpose. Kids in writing circles document their participation and process by keeping a writing circle notebook, and it makes sense for you to keep such a notebook as well (see Chapter 6, p. 85). The writing circle notebook can contain your reading notes, observations, writing topic lists, and, once writing circles are established, drafts, and regular think-back reflections (Figures 2-1 and 3-2).

Include Opportunities for Reflection: Leave some time at the end of study sessions to write about what you have observed and how this experience might influence the way you teach writing. A simple format might be:

What I've observed:

How this observation might influence my teaching:

How I can follow up on this observation:

In addition, as noted above, once writing circles are formed, you can also complete regular think-back reflections as part of your writing circle meetings.

Democracy Now: Share leadership of the book study sessions. In a leaderless group, every member is equally responsible for the group's success. If you decide to have weekly leaders, find an easy process for rotating

responsibilities. Responsibilities could include Book Study Facilitator, Question Master, and Writing Circle Facilitator.

Honor Group Dynamics: Periodically reflect on the group dynamics and what can be done to welcome everyone to the conversation. As in any conversation, be realistic as to how they often diverge only to come back to the point.

Form Writing Circles and "try out" the writing, community building, and minilesson activities: Participating in ongoing writing circles allows you to view classroom practice through authentic experience. Katie Wood Ray has shown us how important the connection is between our own writing experiences and classroom practice, how our own experiences with writing inform the way we teach writing (*What You Know by Heart,* Heinemann, 2002). Taking part in a writing circle while preparing to or inaugurating them in the classroom provides a very serendipitous opportunity to unite and live theory and practice. Writing circles can form as part of the discussion of Chapter 3, Getting Started. Writing circles then continue to meet as a regular part of subsequent study group sessions—becoming publishing circles in conjunction with reading Chapters 10, 11, and 12.

Starting with the initial study group meeting, we want to diffuse your anxiety about writing and sharing your writing. Writing circles exist to alleviate such anxiety and rehabilitate the writing wounded. *Writing Circles* is definitely a "how-to book," and you are encouraged to demonstrate and experience the community building, writing, and minilesson activities during sessions.

Get Off to a Good Start: Some snacks, an agenda, and an opening community building activity from Chapter 4. A comfortable place to have conversation and write—preferably chairs around circular tables. Writing circle notebooks and a copy of the book.

Celebrate: Take time to enjoy each other's participation, writing, and points of view.

What Would Make You Return: Think about the book study in terms of what would make you want to return. The treats, the space, the camaraderie, the community building, the sharing of writing, the conversation,

the ideas, the dreams, the questionings, and the spirit of everyone working together to make writing better.

NOTE: Being comfortable writing quick sustained drafts and feeling at ease with each other are important to the success of writing circles. Being at ease with writing and each other doesn't happen immediately—whether we are talking about kids or adults. So even though the Building Community and Writeable Moments are later in the book (Chapters 4 and 5), it's a good idea to incorporate community building and brief informal writing in the initial meetings of the study group, so that when writing circles start—concurrent with the discussion of Chapter 3—participants will look forward to writing and sharing their writing.

In other words, everyone is encouraged to read ahead, and then revisit the specific reading when it is scheduled for discussion. Please enjoy *Writing Circles*, the book and the experience.

Chapter 1

The Tao of Writing Circles

One of the goals of this chapter is to provide the context and make the argument for writing circles. As part of the discussion, try one of the Building Community activities from Chapter 4 and some brief non-stressful writing—like freewriting (Chapter 5, p. 69). Use your writing circle notebook for the writing.

1. Tao cannot be expressed but it can be known. The title of the chapter provides an opportunity to talk about the connection between "doing" and "learning," "experience" and "understanding."
2. What about the "writing wounded?" When you think about your classroom, how does the term "writing wounded" apply? What about you? Do you belong to the "writing wounded" as well? As a member of the study group, how do you feel when told there will be opportunities to write and share your writing?
3. Basically, writing circles depend on a positive group dynamic. How prepared are your students for productive collaborative group work? Talk about it.

4. "Writing response groups are largely under-utilized in classrooms." When you think about writing in your classroom, how do writing response groups fit in?
5. "Increasingly we lead collaborative lives—and that includes our writing." What kind of collaborative writing experiences are available for kids in your classroom?
6. Have you been in an adult writing group? If so, how does that experience inform what you expect will happen in writing circles?
7. How important is student choice and small group collaboration to learning?
8. How would you rate the "writing confidence" of students you teach? How do you know?

Chapter 2

The Basics

1. Continue to incorporate at least one building community and one writeable moment activity into the study group meeting.
2. Which of writing circles' 13 basic steps do you feel will pose challenges for your students? Which parts of the process do you feel students will readily embrace?
3. In writing circles kids write numerous uncorrected drafts. How do you think kids will respond to this aspect of writing circles? What about parents? School administrators? You?
4. How do you feel about "good faith effort" as a basis for assessment and grades?
5. "We need to teach kids positive ways to talk to one another about their writing." Do students you teach have "positive ways" for discussing one another's writing? How did they learn them?
6. When kids share their writing in small groups in class, do they know how to ask for the kind of information they need to make their writing better?
7. Ongoing reflection is one of writing circles' recurrent structures. What opportunities for students to "reflect" on their learning already occur in your teaching? How important is reflection to learning?

8. The chapter concludes with a series of Frequently Asked Questions. What would be your FAQ? Write your FAQ on an index card. Bring this FAQ to the book study and exchange cards so that everyone has someone else's FAQ. Read the FAQ, write an answer on the reverse side of the index card, and return to sender. Circulate the cards and read. This leads to a wide ranging discussion. The FAQ's themselves can serve as an agenda for future meetings and reading.

Chapter 3

Getting Started

Chapter 3 describes how to introduce writing circles to students (Day One). It's the assumption of this study guide that participants will form writing circles as part of the discussion of Chapter 3, and that writing circle meetings will continue as part of the ongoing study group. If anyone has started writing circles in their classrooms, give them regular opportunities to share their observations about how the writing circle process is going for their students.

1. Consistent with the process described in Chapter 3, come prepared with three writing ideas written on index cards. After the writing circles are formed (strategies on pp. 36–37) each circle chooses a writing topic (using the stack the deck strategy variation (p. 38), names their writing circle, and identifies the next circle meeting's first writer and timekeeper. If there is more than one writing circle, then they need to share their names and writing topic with the base group. If there's time, write briefly about your topic, and complete the abbreviated think-back reflection (p. 41).
2. There is a lot to talk about after experiencing the first writing circle, so leave time and provide a structure for everyone to share observations. How is this going to work for students?

Chapter 3 also describes the second writing circle meeting in which "the recurrent writing circle structure becomes fully operational" (p. 42). Schedule this second writing circle for the next study group meeting. At that time you will have written a draft in your writing circle notebook; also jot down a new topic suggestion. Either the facilitator or a volunteer can model the

"one thing I like about your writing" response minilesson (p. 42) before writing circles reform. Timekeepers and first writers have been identified from the previous writing circle meeting. Once the writing circles have formed and the timekeepers have figured how much time everyone has to share, the first writer begins by reading their writing aloud to the circle. After sharing and response, come to a consensus about the next writing circle topic, and identify the next circle meeting's timekeeper and first writer. If there is more than one writing circle, each circle then re-states their name and their new topic to the entire book study group. This second writing circle meeting concludes by completing the Think-Back form (Figure 2-1). One way to expedite discussion is to pass these completed think-backs around and read what individuals have written, and then talk about what you observe. What are the implications for students?

Chapter 4

Building Community

1. It seems appropriate to try at least one new building community experience from this chapter with students. How did this go? If possible bring some student samples to share with colleagues.
2. It seems equally appropriate to have someone demonstrate one of the building community activities for the study group. How did this go? Implications for your classroom?
3. How can you tell if the climate in your classroom is "too hot," "too cold," or "just right" for writing circles?
4. What differences might you expect to notice between a classroom in which community has been nourished, and one where it has not?
5. Do you agree with Peter Johnson that "in productive classrooms, teachers don't just teach children skills; they build emotionally and relationally healthy learning communities?" What makes a learning community "healthy?"
6. What connections do you see between the building community strategies in this chapter and writing circle success?
7. Writing circles continue to meet.
8. If you have started writing circles in your classrooms, continue to share observations about how it's going.

Chapter 5

Writeable Moments

1. As a way of focusing discussion, try out one of the chapter's "writeable moments"—like personal metaphor—to experience and share in the study group.
2. Do you agree that taking the "pressure" off writing can lead to better writing?
3. How do you respond to Peter Elbow's statement that "freewriting" is the best all around practice in writing I know" (p. 69).
4. What kind of opportunities do kids have to write "back and forth about compelling issues" in your classroom?
5. Try some new low-risk writing activities from this chapter with students. Bring some sample student responses to the study group and talk about the relative merits of this kind of writing. One way to spread the word is to go around the whole group quickly—with each participant stating a writeable moment they used in class and how it worked.
6. Writing circles continue to meet.
7. If you've started writing circles in your classrooms, continue to share observations about how it's going.

Chapter 6

The Writing Circle Notebook

1. Hopefully, you have your own writing circle notebook and experience to bring to the conversation. If your students are also engaged in writing circles, bring some student notebooks to serve as a real-time lens through which to view the writing circle notebook process.
2. "The writing circle notebook is also a resource kids use to understand themselves better as writers" (p. 87). Reviewing some of the sample notebooks (of teachers and students), how useful do you feel the notebook can be to helping students understand themselves as writers?
3. How well does the think-back process work for you and for students?

4. What modifications of the think-back template would you make for your students?
5. Writing circles continue to meet.
6. If you have started writing circles in your classroom, continue to share observations about how it's going.

Chapter 7

Writing Circle Minilessons

1. Which writing circle minilessons come to mind when you read Lucy Calkins' statement, "What is the one thing I can suggest or demonstrate that might help the most?" For you? For your students?
2. Is it true that some kids edit their "voice" from their writing? If so, what factors are at play?
3. As teachers, how do we decide which writing circle minilessons will be productive and when to introduce them?
4. Demonstrate one of the writing circle minilessons for the rest of the participants in the study group.
5. In your writing circle listen for instances of strong voice in the writing you hear and share your observations for the response part of the writing circle meeting.
6. If there is more than one writing circle, each circle shares some of their writing with the larger base group. After each circle has shared, try some different ways of celebrating (p. 112). If the base group is the same as the writing circle, practice a different celebration response after each draft is read aloud. How do you keep these mini-celebrations from taking over the writing and diffusing meaningful response?
7. Fishbowl conferences are versatile, engaging, and fun to do and watch. When your writing circle meets, be on the lookout for a good writing circle minilesson to fishbowl. Choose one and fishbowl it.
8. Continue to provide time to share observations as to how writing circles are working for students.

Chapter 8

Positive Response

1. Think about how students in general respond to each other's writing. What do they say to each other? How did they learn these responses?
2. How did you learn different ways of responding to writing? What are they?
3. Re-read the Responder Roles from the South Coast Writing Project (Figure 8-1, p. 119). How do you feel these guidelines will work with students? What adaptations would you make for kids you teach?
4. What's your take on the paradox stated by Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff that when sharing writing "the reader is always right; yet the writer is always right" (121)?
5. The chapter describes ten low-risk ways for kids to respond to each other's writing. One way to understand the differences between responses is to view a single student draft through all ten responses—such as the responses to the "Darkness" student draft on pp. 127–28. Choose a common student draft (from the book or from a student with permission) and assign different ways to respond to members of the study group. Try to make sure that all ten response strategies are represented. Name the response you are using and write it down on a card or sticky note. Then read through the student draft and write (or draw for "Sketch It") the response on the card or note. Pass the responses around and see the variety of positive possibilities.
6. Demonstrate a "response" minilesson to set up the day's writing circle. Choose a response strategy that can then be used during the writing circle meeting.
7. Writing circles meet.
8. Make time to share observations about how writing circles are working with students.

Chapter 9

Enjoyable Ways Kids Can Share Writing with the Whole Class

1. This chapter focuses on the transition from the individual circles to the whole class sharing of new topics and some writing from the circles with the whole group.
   - Why is it important for this kind of "reporting out" to take place?
   - What benefits are there to restating the writing circle name and new topic for the entire group or class?
   - What are the benefits to sharing some writing from each circle whole group or class?
   - Is it realistic to have a brief class-wide celebration after each writing circle shares? What are the possible benefits? What could go wrong?
2. What style and craft minilesson would you base on the golden sentences from the Femme Lattes (p. 135)?
3. For today's writing circle meeting, have the writer choose the type of response they want from the group before they read their draft aloud. How important is it for the writer to choose the response they need from their writing circle?
4. It's not necessary to choose a new writing topic for the next meeting. Instead, you will be searching through all your drafts looking for possible writing "kernels" to grow through the publication circle.
5. Try out one of the whole class sharing strategies: Let Your Light Shine, I Hear a Symphony, Post It, Open Mike, Gallery Walk, Golden Sentence, Read-Around, Found Poem, First Impression/ Final Impression. Be sensitive to the reality that some of the sharing strategies take more time than others. Use the results of this sharing to focus conversation on the whole class sharing aspect of the writing circle dynamic.
6. Continue to share observation about how writing circles are working in the classrooms.

Chapter 10

Publishing Circles

1. The chapter describes the transition from writing circles to publishing circles. The best basis for a study of the chapter is for you to engage in the same process. That means scheduling time to review all your drafts and choose the "writing kernel" you want to explore more fully. Share the kernel with your circle and discuss the next steps for developing and revising it. The process of choosing the writing kernel provides an opportunity to reflect on and discuss the benefits and challenges of moving a draft forward to a finished piece.
2. After you've had time to revise the writing kernel (either within the actual study group meeting time or on your own), work with the agent, illustrator, reviewer, editor, and author role sheets on pp. 143–150. If time is limited, the role sheets can be divided so that each role sheet is completed at least once by someone in the circle. This leads to a more informed discussion of the value of the distinctly different conferences described in the chapter. For example, whoever completes the Agent conference and role sheet can talk about that role and the value of the resulting information elicited through the Agent conference—and similarly for the other conferences and roles. The point is to have sufficient first-hand experience with the four conferences and five role sheets to have an informed and reality-based conversation about the whole process. This is the time to bring classroom experiences using the roles to the conversation.
3. "The problem with 'role sheets' in general is their tendency to become mechanical" (p. 138). Given your (and your students') experience with the publication circle role sheets, do you feel they successfully resist this "tendency?"
4. Do you feel the publication circle roles—agent, illustrator, reviewer, editor, and author—provide sufficient range of perspectives and information to make the process meaningful and productive?
5. "Adapt these roles to reflect the realities of writing in your classroom" (p.142). In what ways would you revise the roles and/or role sheets in your classroom?

6. The scheduling realities of your study group may make it difficult to fully complete the publication circle, especially fully conferencing, and then revising and editing the writing into final form. Make adjustments, but don't skip opportunities to experience and share observations about the publication circle roles and conference process.
7. How important is it for students to publish some of their writing? Are there situations in which publication becomes a negative? Explain the negative dynamic.
8. How well do students make the transition from writing circles to publishing circles? What are some observations from classrooms?

Chapter 11

Smooth Operators: Assessment, Evaluation, and Management

1. How do you feel about Tom Romano's statement that "the amount of writing students do should be far more than a teacher can evaluate?" What are the implications of this statement for how you teach writing?
2. Choose a couple of the assessment strategies described in the chapter to complete, share, and discuss.
3. Which of the assessment strategies do you feel would work best with your students? What adaptations for your students would you make?
4. Do you feel the described assessment strategies are sufficient measurements for the writing circle/publication circle process?
5. How comfortable are you now with the concept of "good-faith grades" (p. 158)? Have your opinions changed from when you first read about this good faith approach? How are students responding to the "good faith grade" concept? Colleagues? Administrators? Parents?
6. "We all have a red plastic cup or its equivalent—our own ways of managing groups and group process" (p. 166). Share your favorite "red cup" strategy.
7. Publication circles continue to meet to experience the conferencing roles and strategies described in Chapter 10.
8. Continue to share student writing and publishing circle observations from classrooms.

Chapter 12

Writing Circle Variations

1. What advantages do you see to implementing writing circles in the content areas?
2. Do you feel that writing circles in the content areas will increase student learning and improve writing skills? What is your reasoning?
3. How can administrators and colleagues gain writing circle "buy in" from content area teachers?
4. Now that you are near the conclusion of the book study group, if there's interest, discuss how it would be possible to establish an ongoing teacher/administrator writing circle. What's necessary to make it happen?
5. Author and educational keynote speaker Doug Reeves has said that if teachers and administrators return to the classroom or school office from a professional development experience and nothing happens, then the "adult learning experience was nothing more than an illusion, a mirage of improved practice in the middle of a desert of indifference." What needs to happen to make sure that the meaning and experience of this writing circle study group will prove to be more than a "mirage?"
6. When you think about writing circles, what do you envision for you, your students, and your school?
7. How will teachers who plan to implement writing circles (or are already doing so) going to stay connected for support and dissemination of information?
8. If this is the final book study group meeting, celebrate some writing from everyone using one of the whole-class sharing strategies from Chapter 9 (such as displaying a golden sentence from everyone or a section of each person's writing as a gallery walk).
9. As you take leave of each other, remember, to quote *Writing Circle's* epilogue, that "the end is also the beginning."