

**Circle Up! Incorporating Book Circles into an Agricultural Education  
Teaching Methods Course**

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### Introduction

In previous years, students enrolled in our teaching methods course were assigned to independently read a pedagogy-based book, then give a presentation on it at the end of the term. As instructors, we found students would either only partially read the text or wait until the last two weeks of the term to begin reading. This resulted in a shallow understanding of the content and an inability to connect their book to course concepts and their student teaching experience. To counter this, we incorporated the idea of “book circles” into the Applied Instructional Strategies course in the fall of 2018 at Oregon State University. The purpose of book circles is to increase collaborative class reading assignments, induce higher-order thinking through peer learning, conversation and application (Block, Mangieri & Barnes, 1994), and differentiate how students are learning teaching theory from research-supported texts.

The agriculture teacher preparation program at Oregon State University is committed to crafting learning experiences during preservice courses that afford higher-order thinking for students. Damon (1984) found that peer collaboration can expedite intellectual discovery and the acquisition of knowledge. Vygotsky argued social activity leads to a higher plane of thinking and when students experience dialectical transformation, it leads to qualitative growth and comprehension (Tudge, & Rogoff, 1999). The incorporation of book circles in the Applied Instructional Strategies course allowed students to engage in peer collaboration and social activity, enhancing their overall educational experience in the course.

### How it works

Book circles are essentially curriculum-based mini book clubs. Prior to the start of the term, we (the instructors) selected three books that would not only align with course concepts and objectives, but be appealing to the students and feasible to read within the 10-week term. The following books were selected because they provide the reader with practical teaching strategies, offer research-supported evidence as to why these strategies were appropriate, and give evidence for how they can benefit student learning. The first text was *Teach Like a Pirate* by Burgess (2012). This text offers practical techniques and innovative ideas to expand student engagement, boost creativity and transform educators. The second text was *Other People's Children* by Delpit (2006) which develops ideas on how teachers can be better cultural transmitters and incorporate culturally responsive teaching in their classrooms. The third text was *How Learning Works* by Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman (2010). This text draws on research to explain seven learning principles to improve student learning (Ambrose, et al., 2010).

At the start of the term, we shared the names and authors of each book with the class along with a brief summary. Students were encouraged to read more extensive reviews of each book then email their order preference to the lead instructor. Once the preferences were sent, we formed the book circles with three to five students in each book circle group. Once the book circles were formed, students purchased the text on their own then were tasked with determining the pace at which they would read the text throughout the term. Three one-hour meeting times were designated in the syllabus. Before the first meeting, students briefly met to determine how many pages should be read before the first in-class book circle meeting. The course instructors suggested students actively highlight, mark, and take notes while reading individually so that in-class conversation would be fruitful.

For the in-class book circle meetings, we gave no guidelines except that there should be no lulls in conversation and that the discussion topics should be more profound than “what you

like or dislike about the book”. During the in-class meetings, we walked around and engaged in conversation with each group. We mostly listened, but occasionally asked probing questions such as, “how has what you have read connected to concepts taught in this course?” or, “which strategies do you think will be easiest to adopt in your own practice?”. During the final week of the term, each book circle group gave a formal 10-minute presentation synthesizing the main points of the book. They were asked to provide an overview of key insights, how the book connected to the class content, and how they will use this book in their future teaching.

### **Results**

As instructors, we were very satisfied with the outcome of the book circles. Evidence from listening in on the three book circle meetings as well as the 10-minute presentation suggest that all students read their assigned text and engaged in meaningful discussion about the book throughout the term. When asked about whether or not book circles should be incorporated in future methodology courses, nine of the 11 responded favorably. The other two did not respond. Also, when asked, students spoke about the numerous benefits of book circles. One student said she enjoyed the presentation aspect because, “it helped us to think of the books in a different way.” Another student reflected, “it allowed us to share our ideas, and our perception of what the book was saying with classmates.” Another shared, “it allowed us to be engaged with the content throughout the term ... after hearing other presentations we were further engaged because individually reading all the books we were exposed to would not have been feasible.”

### **Costs**

The physical cost associated with implementing this innovation was minimal. The students were required to purchase the text on their own as this replaced a traditional textbook. Each text could be purchased for under \$35 on Amazon.com or loaned from the campus library. We encouraged students to acquire the text in a medium that best suited them (e.g., physical text, EBook, audiobook). We suggest keeping a few copies of each text in the event that a student is unable to purchase the text. The total time spent on book circles, including group discussion and presentations, was approximately three hours and 45 minutes. Anyone wishing to implement book circles into their class would need to decide if they want to take time from other instructional activities for this idea.

### **Suggestions**

For anyone wishing to incorporate this innovative idea into their course, we suggest selected books be appropriate for the time frame of the course. The book length may vary according to term/semester length, but should not be too short or too long. During a 10-week term and three class meetings, students were reading approximately 50 to 75 pages in preparation for each session. We also suggest books that are relevant to your content area. While the books we selected were teaching-related, they were not related specifically to agriculture. This made connection-building difficult for a few students. If you are teaching an instructional design course, it may be more impactful to find a book relevant to the specific content-area.

## References

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