

Textmasters: Bringing Literature Circles to Textbook Reading Across the Curriculum

This strategy enables teachers to use literature circles with not just content area trade books but textbooks too.

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If students of today were to walk into a science classroom of their parents' generation, what differences would they see? Maybe they would notice the lack of technology, but that might be the only difference. If it was not a lab day, the teacher would likely be standing or sitting in front of students, directing them to read a certain number of pages from the textbook, and asking them to answer the questions at the end of the chapter. Return this student to their current classroom, and it is likely the same literacy practices would be employed, albeit enhanced with the use of interactive whiteboards or electronic texts.

A group of middle school students, their teacher, and I challenged this traditional notion of content area textbook reading in their classroom. Together we embarked on an action research project that ended with the creation of the strategy that we call Textmasters.

This article describes the process of implementing Textmasters, as well as the action research project that documents its efficacy in content area, middle school classrooms.

Background Information

What Are Literature Circles?

Traditional literature circles were described by Harvey Daniels in the early 1990s (Daniels, 1994). In this classroom practice, students divide into groups to read fiction books that the teacher has briefly introduced to the whole class. During sessions, students assume various "roles" that guide their reading (Burns, 1998; Daniels, 1994; Peterson & Belizaire, 2006). Students meet on a regular basis to discuss agreed-upon sections of the book, rotating the roles among members of the group. The strategy ends with students presenting their book to their peers through creative presentations. Traditionally, the literature circle strategy was applied to fiction. Recently, it has been updated and used with a variety of texts, including nonfiction.

A similar framework was proposed for book clubs (Raphael, Florio-Ruane, & George, 2004; Raphael & McMahon, 1994). Designed to specifically meet the needs of adolescent readers, book clubs use a variety of instructional groupings to engage students in responding to text. Whole-group instruction in reading strategies, whole-class discussion on the readings, and student-led, small-group discussion help students bridge the transition from early elementary reading experiences to intermediate and middle school texts (Raphael et al., 2004).

Rationale

Literature circles and book clubs bring together powerful research-based theories of literacy education (Daniels, 1994; Raphael et al., 2004; Raphael & McMahon, 1994). Researchers have examined the discourse that takes place during literature circle meetings and found that discussion is often purposeful and critically minded (Latendresse, 2004; Long & Gove, 2003; Sandmann & Gruhler, 2007). The strategy has been found to empower students who thrive in the small-group setting, allowing for marginalized voices to be heard (Johnson, 2000; Sandmann & Gruhler, 2007, Scott, 1994). Students often feel an increased sense of responsibility toward their group and their own learning through the use of the various roles and discussion (Owens, 1995; Scott 1994).

Literature Circles and Nonfiction

Literature circles have been used in conjunction with nonfiction with positive results (Miller, Straits, Kucan, Trathen, & Dass, 2007; Stein & Breed, 2004; Straits & Nichols, 2006). Classroom practitioners suggest making a natural progression of literature circles into the realm of nonfiction with historical fiction and then using biographies (Stein & Breed, 2004). Educators have taken the literature circle strategy and used it to enhance content area vocabulary study (Miller et al., 2007). Others have used the strategy with a strictly science lens, selecting roles that focus specifically on the science content in a novel (Straits & Nichols, 2006).

A New Type of Literature Circle Takes Shape

The idea for Textmasters arose from a need expressed by a group of graduate students that I taught in a summer content area, reading class. We had just finished a round of literature circles using historical fiction. While debriefing the activity, one educator, Mrs. Stelkan (pseudonym), raised the complaint that while she would love to use literature circles in her content area classes, she did not have the resources to purchase the trade books necessary for implementation. Her sentiment was echoed by the majority of her peers; these practicing educators reported that they were assigned a set of textbooks for all content areas and that requests for outside resources were often turned down. Thinking aloud in class, I hypothesized, “Wouldn’t it be neat if we developed a kind of literature circle for use with different textbooks?” Eyes lit up around the room.

Mrs. Stelkan, a fifth-grade teacher, liked the idea of developing literature circle roles for assisting students in reading the textbook for several reasons. First, she taught four different classes of science during the day—reflective of the middle school set-up of the school where she taught—but had only one set of science textbooks. Any reading that was done had to be in class. Next, Mrs. Stelkan was completing a masters’ in reading specialization and knew that in order for her students to be successful across the curriculum, she needed to reinforce good literacy practices in her science classroom. Finally, Mrs. Stelkan felt the same need that I did: textbook reading in the content areas needed a change. Literature circles are so enjoyable with all types of fiction and nonfiction—why not the textbook?

During the rest of the content area reading class, Mrs. Stelkan would come in and show me her ideas for using the textbook in literature circles. She then volunteered her class of incoming fifth graders to pilot our still nameless strategy. We decided to set up this pilot as an action research study.

We began our action research study by following one chapter of traditional textbook instruction. Students read the assigned reading on their own, answered questions provided by the textbook, reviewed the material using a study sheet developed by Mrs. Stelkan, and then took a chapter test. Seventy-three students took the

chapter test and the average score was 86%. This score provided the baseline for our action research study.

Next, Mrs. Stelkan brought me in to train her students using the roles that we selected for applying literature circles to textbook reading. We examined both traditional literature circle roles and new ones created by practitioners applying the strategy to nonfiction and content area reading and selected four: Discussion Director, Summarizer, Vocabulary Enricher, and Webmaster. Two of these roles are traditional roles: Discussion Director and Summarizer. One role, the Vocabulary Enricher, is generally applied to nonfiction literature circles. The final role, Webmaster, was one Mrs. Stelkan created to reflect the fifth-grade reading standard that asked students to apply knowledge gained from reading to a variety of graphic organizers. For all roles, we rewrote the tasks to reflect textbook structures. These tasks are summarized in Table 1.

The name Textmasters was developed to reflect the nature of the strategy. For a student to be a “master” of any text they read, they must be competent in all of the responsibilities we chose: ask good questions (Discussion Director), summarize what they read (Summarizer), learn about new words (Vocabulary Enricher), and organize important information into graphic organizers (Webmaster).

Students Enter the Research

A survey of Mrs. Stelkan’s students revealed that 60% of them had participated in literature circles in

language arts classrooms. When they participated in the strategy, they were taught to use traditional role sheets to guide their reading. Although Daniels (2006) has recently advocated for the use of alternate ways to invoke the roles into the strategy, we decided to retain the use of the role sheets to scaffold the implementation of the strategy with the textbook.

To make sure that all students were comfortable with the strategy, I briefly guided all of the students through a Textmasters session. I chose an article from *Time for Kids* that mirrored the subject the students were currently studying in science. We read the article aloud and then, as a class, brainstormed ways that students could master the content of this text. A list of creative contributions was produced, among them the four roles that Mrs. Stelkan and I had chosen for Textmasters. We briefly went over each role sheet, answering any questions and making clarifications as needed. Students were already conveniently sitting in groups of four so we assigned each student in the group a role and gave them 10 minutes to fill out their role sheet using the article read aloud in class.

To show students how to conduct a Textmasters meeting, we used a “fishbowl” technique (Young, 2007). In this strategy, a group of students model participation for the rest of the class. The chosen group sits in the center of the room (the fishbowl) while the rest of the class circles around them to watch. Prior to class, Mrs. Stelkan had pointed out to me the group that would provide the best modeling of a Textmasters discussion.

Table 1 Summary of Textmasters Roles

Role	Description
Discussion Director	Your job is to develop a list of questions that your group might want to discuss about this part of the book. Don’t worry about the small details; your task is to help people talk about the big ideas in the reading and share their reactions. Usually the best discussion questions come from your own thoughts, feelings, and concerns as you read.
Summarizer	Your job is to prepare a brief summary of today’s reading. Your group discussion will start with your 1–2-minute statement that covers the key points, main highlights, and general idea of today’s reading assignment.
Vocabulary Enricher	Your job is to be on the lookout for a few especially important words in today’s reading. If you find words that are puzzling or unfamiliar, mark them while you are reading and then later jot down their definition, either from a dictionary or from some other source.
Webmaster	Your job is to take all the information that you have read and make a graphic organizer to show your understanding. Use keywords, phrases, and examples from your reading to make your organizer. You can use any type of graphic organizer you would like—e.g., web, pyramid, chart.

The rest of the class gathered around this table, and I led the students through a Textmasters meeting.

In a Textmasters meeting, the Discussion Director begins by asking the questions prepared on the role sheet. Discussion follows each question. In the beginning of the practice, this question-and-answer session is usually very simple but as students grow into the strategy, higher-level questions are asked and questions are often followed up by other questions. The Discussion Director then asks the other members to share roles. Students often respond to each role with more questions or connections, as appropriate. The meeting is ended with a self-evaluation of each group member (see Figure 1).

The “fishbowl” was debriefed with students. They commented that listening skills were important and they were surprised by the insights their classmates had into the same reading.

Setting Up the Textmasters With the Textbook

After the brief training, Mrs. Stelkan set up a full round of Textmasters reading. Rather than letting students schedule the reading of the chapter, she planned

the amount of reading to be done for each session. This was done to accommodate the fact that all reading had to be done in class with the one set of textbooks. She decided that twice-weekly Textmasters meetings would fit in well with her laboratory and direct instruction times. She divided the text by the number of meetings for the upcoming month and set four readings. Using the groups of desks already set up in her classroom, she also set a rotation schedule of the roles, so that each student had a chance to be each role at least once. Finally, to allow for ease of set-up, she put together folders for each student with the reading and role schedule.

Every Textmasters day followed a set routine. The period began with 20 minutes of silent reading of the assigned portion of the text and filling out the role sheet for the day, as designated by the role rotation. The next 20 minutes allowed for the sharing of roles and for group work on the culminating activity. The final 10 minutes were set aside for the self-reflection sheet.

As mentioned earlier, literature circles often end with culminating activities where students share their reading with others through a variety of activities. To move away from a traditional study guide, we felt that

Figure 1 Self-Reflection Sheet

Type of contribution	Very good	Satisfactory	Needs improvement
I shared my ideas and offered my suggestions.			
I spoke clearly and slowly enough to be understood.			
I answered others' questions.			
I remained on topic and helped the group stay focused.			
I encouraged others to participate if needed.			
I disagreed without hurting others' feelings.			
I summarized or repeated my ideas when necessary.			
I gave reasons for opinions.			
I listened courteously and effectively.			
I tried to understand and extend the suggestions of others.			

a culminating activity to present the important information from the chapter would be a fun and informative way to wrap up the first round of Textmasters and help students review for the upcoming chapter test. Mrs. Stelkan compiled a list of culminating activity choices and each Textmasters group was allowed to choose. She also gave the students a list of vocabulary that they must include in their presentations to boost the reviewing power of the presentations.

Classroom Visit

Two weeks into the strategy, I visited the school to observe the students during a Textmasters meeting. The students entered the classroom and Mrs. Stelkan put on classical music to signal to the students that the silent reading/role completion was to begin. She also set a timer to make sure that she did not go over the 20 minutes for these activities. Students worked quietly. Mrs. Stelkan circulated the classroom, stopping to answer questions and to guide work on a role sheet. She then sat with a struggling student and quietly read the text to her. She later explained that the benefit of having this independent work time allowed her to work one-on-one with students most in need of attention.

When the timer went off, students began their Textmasters conversations. Just as they had been instructed, the Discussion Directors began the conversation. Students eagerly responded to questions through energetic discussion, often returning to their reading to prove a point. The Vocabulary Enrichers shared the important words they had found. The group looked these over and made suggestions for further words to study. The Summarizers read the summary, with additions from their group. Finally, the Webmasters displayed the completed graphic organizer, answering questions from students about why this format was chosen.

After the Textmasters roles were shared, students worked on their culminating activity. This chapter was about producers and consumers, so it lent itself to a variety of activities. One group created a Jeopardy game using PowerPoint. Another group created a team of news reporters. A third group decided that a quiz show in the style of "Are You Smarter Than a 5th Grader?" was perfect. They were applying their new knowledge to these activities with a host of reading, writing, and speaking skills.

Performance!

I returned at the end of the month to watch the culminating activities. From the planning stages, these performances had evolved to elaborate presentations.

One culminating activity stood out from the rest. One group did performance art. It was listed on the possibilities for culminating activities, and the group had taken the time to research what performance art was and apply it to this chapter. One student would yell out the important vocabulary word and then the rest of the students would illustrate the meaning of the word with their bodies. It was effective and hilarious at the same time!

Results

Student Views of Textmasters

As the first round of Textmasters drew to a close, Mrs. Stelkan provided an exit slip for students to write their thoughts about the new strategy. She asked students to respond to the question, What do you think of the Textmasters strategy?

Students were opinionated in their reactions to the strategy. After reading through all responses, three themes emerged: response to the roles sheets, comparison of the strategy to other content area reading activities, and improvements made in their reading. The themes were checked using interrater reliability: Two outside readers read through the student responses and coded them using the three themes to provide validity of 90% or above.

Responses to the Roles Sheets. Students had several interesting opinions about the roles. Most students felt that the Discussion Director was an enjoyable role. "I really like Discussion Director because I love making questions," said one student. Another stated, "Discussion Director is fun since you kind of lead and extend the discussion." Other students commented on the difficulty of the Summarizer role: "I don't really like doing the Summarizer role sheet because it takes so long." Another said, "My favorite job is the Webmaster because it's fun making different kinds of graphs to show what I know." One student asked for more variety: "Maybe we should add a few different roles," while others were satisfied with the roles used: "I like the fact that we never do the same job twice."

Comparison of the Strategy to Other Content Area Reading

Activities. Several students commented on how they enjoyed participating in something different in a science class: “They’re funner [sic] than worksheets,” “It is definitely better than the types of learning in previous years,” and “I’m learning more by doing this than [sic] just reading and doing a big writing thing. You are also thinking outside the box.” A few students talked about the new use of the book: “I like how the questions are not in the book” and “I really like it because we are reading out of our textbook but in a much funner [sic] way.” Finally, students also mentioned the learning aspect of the strategy: “It seems easier but I know I am learning something.” And “I like Textmasters. It gets you to really think and wonder.”

Improvements Made in Reading. The final theme that emerged through the student exit slips came from student comments about connecting the strategy to reading. Students talked about vocabulary: “It helped me understand how to look carefully in the text for the definitions of words I don’t know.” Students also mentioned the short reading assignments: “Reading a couple of pages made it easier to understand the stuff.” Others talked about focus and time management: “I’m staying on task more because of the roles” and “It helps me work slower instead of rushing and messing up.” Finally, other students wrote about how their peers helped them improve their skills: “The Summarizer is helping me in reading and retelling the story” and “It helps you understand it better by you getting to listen to other people’s explanations.”

Teacher View of Textmasters

After the implementation of the strategy, Mrs. Stelkan and I talked at length about ways to improve the strategy. Her first concern was about keeping students occupied who finished the reading and their role sheet early. She found that 20 minutes was sufficient for almost all of her students to finish their work but those who read quickly often found themselves staring blankly or bothering other students. Students who finished early were invited to read silently from their independent reading books, to create new and different role sheets, or to reread the section to be true experts at the reading.

Another way that Mrs. Stelkan changed the strategy during the first trial was to begin each session with a quick activity to highlight and pronounce important words. She found that struggling students benefited from this quick group introduction to the lesson and it led to fewer queries during silent reading time regarding unknown words.

Finally, Mrs. Stelkan hopes that in further implementation of the strategy, she can lessen students’ reliance on the role sheets: “I noticed that talkative groups would only use the sheets for quick reference during the Textmasters discussions. Hopefully, all students can make this transition so that it becomes less about the role sheets and more about the discussion.”

Mrs. Stelkan praised the strategy in three specific ways. “The students really worked toward clarifying important ideas in the chapter for each other, often with no help from me.” She said the heterogeneous groups that she purposefully created for the strategy assisted with this first strength. All students had a chance to teach one another something through the rotation of the roles.

Time on task was the second highlight of the strategy for Mrs. Stelkan: “Students were engaged from the moment they picked up their textbooks and role sheets until the bell rang. I was surprised how little direction the students needed after the initial practice period; in fact, they were almost always disappointed when I told them it was time to clean up!”

The final positive feature of the strategy for Mrs. Stelkan was the lessening of preparation during the actual strategy. She said, “Don’t get me wrong; it took a long time for me to put together those folders with the different role sheets, draw up the schedule, and divide up the reading. But, after that work period, I was done. I could concentrate on helping students who needed my attention during the reading period, rather than focus on organization and discipline.”

Student Scores

As stated earlier, Mrs. Stelkan and I conducted this trial using action research. The students had one

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month of traditional textbook reading, questioning, and review, followed by a chapter test. The baseline scores on the first chapter test were an average of 86%. The same 73 students took the chapter test for the second chapter, which was read and reviewed using the Textmasters strategy. The average test score was raised over three percentage points to 89.3%. Out of the 73 students, 14 students' scores went down, 10 students' scores remained the same, and 49 students' scores increased. The improvement of all students is seen as statistically significant (see Table 2).

Implications

Fostering Engagement With Textbook Reading

Too often, students are isolated in textbook reading in the content areas (Fang, 2008; Guthrie & Davis, 2003; Loxterman, Beck, & McKeown, 1994; Radcliffe, Caverly, Hand, & Franke, 2008). The Textmasters strategy brought students together not only to share their ideas about the textbook reading but also to teach others through the culminating activity. As stated earlier, students mentioned on their exit slips the benefits of listening to someone else's opinion about the reading and their excitement in asking and answering questions to explore the text through the use of the role sheets.

Fang (2008) spoke specifically about the stark transition from storybooks in early elementary to the almost exclusive use of expository text in intermediate grades and beyond. Textmasters helps ease this transition through reduced reading loads and engagement through the role sheets and group work.

The Benefits of Group Work in Reading in the Content Areas

Other researchers have employed literature circles in the content areas with trade books with positive results (Miller et al., 2007; Stein & Breed, 2004; Straits

& Nichols, 2006). Indeed, several studies have shown the constructive effects of group work in reading in the content areas (Shaaban, 2006; Slavin, Chamberlain, & Daniels, 2007; Toumasis, 2004). Mrs. Stelkan and her students spoke enthusiastically about how the groups came together to construct knowledge from the textbook and present it to others.

Shaaban (2006) reported how group work in literacy activities particularly provides motivation for reading. Textmasters provided for this through the responsibility created by the role sheets; several students mentioned how they did not want to "let their group down" by not doing a good job in explaining their role.

Extensions of the Strategy

Since the Textmasters strategy was first piloted in Mrs. Stelkan's fifth-grade science classroom, other teachers from varying content areas and grade levels have implemented the strategy. Currently, two new groups of teachers are piloting the strategy in high school: teachers of English-language learners and of ninth-grade social studies. Preliminary findings suggest a positive trend in comprehension as measured by chapter tests, similar to those found by the present study.

Stepping Into a 21st-Century Learning Environment

Walk back into that content area classroom from the beginning of the article. This classroom is now implementing the Textmasters strategy. It is role-sharing time, and you see students sharing information from the chapter, asking one another questions, and referring back to the textbook to make a point. Stay a little bit longer and you will watch them plan presentations to teach their classmates about what they are learning. This is not the content area classroom of their parents' generation!

Table 2 Paired Sample

Test	Mean	Standard Deviation	Significance
Chapter test 1	86.34	7.52	
Chapter test 2	89.31	7.88	.004*

* = results are significant at .05

Note

To use the strategies described in this article in your classroom, see “Textmasters: Shaking Up Textbook Reading in Science Classrooms” on ReadWriteThink.org. The Lesson offers step-by-step directions for how to implement Textmasters roles with textbook reading in content area classrooms and includes student printouts and a final assessment rubric.

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