

## ABSTRACT

MITCHELL SMITH, KATHERINE ELIZABETH. Distance Learning Literature Circles: An Action Research Study on Literature Circles in the Time of Covid-19. (Under the direction of Dr. Young).

Literature circles are a widely used and highly effective strategy to increase engagement, promote authentic collaboration, and encourage independent reading. However, in the shift to fully online learning due to the Covid-19 pandemic, I wondered whether literature circles would translate well to a virtual environment. This action research study explores the benefits of online literature circle units as well as which components of a literature circle unit most contribute to student learning. This study took place during the last unit in the fall of 2020 with 31 student participants from my English I Honors classes. The collected data consisted of pre-, mid-, and post-unit surveys; transcripts from students' live Zoom breakout group discussions; threaded discussion board conversations; and my teacher research log. The findings were many, but the greatest takeaways were that students overwhelmingly found that the live literature circle discussions contributed most to their learning; however, students demonstrated more academic and discussion skills in the threaded discussion boards. The greatest benefits were positive collaboration and enjoyable discussions among peers, and the biggest challenges were lack of participation in the live discussions and missing as well as late posts in the threaded discussion groups. However, even with these group issues, 60% of participants were highly satisfied with the unit, 37% were mostly satisfied, and 3% were satisfied. No students expressed dissatisfaction with the unit, and everyone was able to learn and benefit. This action research study demonstrates that there are significant academic and interpersonal benefits to conducting fully online literature circles.

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Distance Learning Literature Circles: An Action Research Study on Literature Circles in the  
Time of Covid-19

by  
Katherine Mitchell Smith

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## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Karen Lee Shields Mitchell, who instilled in me a love of books and learning before I could walk. I would also like to dedicate this thesis to my husband, Aaron Smith, who talked me off of many hypothetical ledges and who kept our house spotless, our animals alive, and myself fed for the last two years so that I could focus on my studies.

## BIOGRAPHY

Katherine Mitchell Smith was born in Saluda, South Carolina. She attended Francis Marion University to pursue a degree in English for secondary education before spending her first year of teaching in Spartanburg, SC. She is going into her seventh year of teaching, six of which have been spent at an early college in Durham, North Carolina. She currently teaches English I and II Honors to freshmen students, and her biggest goal with each new group of students is to help them discover a love of reading and an ability to critically analyze everything that they experience. Her academic interests include literature circles (of course), writer's workshops, project-based learning, critical theory, creative writing, and post-colonial literature. Katherine graduated in 2021 with a Master of Science in Education after completing NC State's New Literacies and Global Learning program.

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

Literature Circles (LCs) have become common practice in k-12 and college classrooms across the nation and the world. I have incorporated them successfully into my traditional high school English classes for the past four years, and my students have always told me that the LC units were their favorites. The students had so much fun discussing their books in authentic ways, and they were more invested in their journals, group discussions, projects, and essays because they were able to choose the discussion topics, research options, and writing prompts. In a normal school year, our LC days would consist of students gathering eagerly around tables and collections of desks—books and notes at the ready—to engage in twenty minutes of passionate conversation about their books. However, the 2020-2021 school year was anything but normal.

This action research study aims to understand the best practices for implementing LCs in the fully online high school English classroom as well as to understand which components of virtual LCs contribute to the efficacy of student learning. This thesis examines the survey responses, threaded discussion posts, and live discussion transcripts of 31 student participants in my English I Honors classes in order to gain insights into how to facilitate LCs effectively online. While my online learning situation in the fall of 2021 was due to the Covid-19 pandemic, my contributes to the field of education beyond this specific context, especially for schools that typically operate in a fully online environment as well as to teachers wanting to extend their classrooms beyond the boundaries of their four walls. Furthermore, it is unclear when schools will be able to return to “normal,” so virtual or hybrid learning in some form might be a regular part of school for years to come.

The 2020/2021 school year was different from the start, but I did not want to give up on the one teaching strategy that had never failed to excite my students about reading, writing, and academic discussion. It took a little more work and planning than usual, but the bizarre circumstances provided a perfect opportunity to research a category of LCs that is nearly absent in the historical and current research literature: fully online LCs in the high school English classroom. I wondered what the advantages were to conducting online LCs as well as the best practices. Throughout the fall semester of 2020 with my English I honors classes, my students participated in two LC units: the first was a trial run to try out strategies and elicit student feedback, and the second was the focus of this action research study.

### **Research Context and Rationale**

I first became interested in LCs when I started teaching American literature during my first year at the early college where I currently teach. It is an incredibly diverse school with a population that is 3% Asian, 28% Hispanic, 63% Black, 5% White, and 1% two or more races. Within those categories, there is even more diversity. I have taught students who were either first or second generation immigrants from China, the Philippines, Nigeria, Liberia, Ethiopia, Ghana, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Peru, etc. However, the American literature curriculum consisted of mostly white authors with an occasional African American author included as an afterthought. I knew that if I only used the textbook, my students would have a very limited perspective of American literature. Therefore, I designed my first LC unit, *Modern American Voices*, centered around immigrant experiences in the United States. I wanted to give my students the opportunity to read books that would be windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990). Then, when students were making their book selections, they could choose what they needed. If students wanted to explore a book that provided a window into a

different culture, they could do that. Alternatively, if students needed to feel validated by seeing someone like them mirrored in literature, they could have that experience too.

Additionally, LCs encourage students to take ownership of their discussions and their learning. Rather than me giving a lecture on the African American experience vs. the African immigrant experience in Adichie's *Americanah*, the students were able to take that issue up for themselves, share their own experiences, connect to what was happening in the book, and analyze how the author emphasized that particular contrast. My former students and I had an amazing time, and all of them left my class knowing that they were included in the American experience, that their voices and their expertise mattered, and that they had the skills to continue reading and discussing great books. When I switched to teaching English I, I continued to use LCs for the same purpose: to provide my students with access to rich stories about people from all different races, backgrounds, and experiences.

Beyond the racial demographics of my school, there are other factors that continue to influence how I conduct LCs and why I considered it worth the effort to study them in an online environment. 41% of the students at my school are eligible for free lunch, and 10% are eligible for reduced lunch, which makes us a Title 1 school. This typically is a negative stigma for a school, but we consistently have a 100% graduation rate as well as an A+ ranking for being in the top 5% of all North Carolina schools for both math and reading proficiency. Our school also received the National Blue Ribbon Award in 2019 for excellence in education. Finally, our school is located on a college campus, and our students start taking college classes during the second semester of their freshman year. By the time they graduate, they earn at least two years of free college credit. Our Title 1 status and the fact that many of our students are first generation college students mean that our students need additional support, but their stellar academic

performance demonstrates the amazing feats that students can accomplish when teachers set the bar high and provide all students with the scaffolds and skills that they need. In my experience, LCs have helped students with the soft skills that they need in order to be successful at the college level, such as how to manage their time, advocate for themselves, and collaborate meaningfully in an academic context. Furthermore, by setting high standards for the level of analysis that I expect in students' discussions and their written work, I am able to have students work together and read high-interest young adult novels without sacrificing in the area of rigor.

Even though it would have been easier to keep all students on the same track, I knew that my students in the past had grown tremendously through LCs, and I did not want to take away that opportunity from my new group of students. Additionally, I wanted to research the benefits of such a unit in a fully online context and the best practices for student growth so that I could share that information with my school and district as well as the wider educational community. Overall, many contextual factors and influences led me to study fully online LCs in the high school English classroom.

One final bit of context is that when we moved into fully online learning for the fall semester, our school district provided all high school students with a laptop, and there were Wi-Fi hotspots available for students if they had need of them. Those laptops were equipped with working microphones and speakers, which were necessary for students taking part in synchronous discussions. Therefore, knowing that students had access to the resources that they needed, I went into my unit of study with high expectations and without fear of setting up inequitable learning environments.

## CHAPTER 2

### Literature Review

#### Cooperative Learning

LCs fall under the larger umbrella category of cooperative learning (CL), which is one of the oldest fields of study in social psychology—the first study dates back to the late 1800’s. Since that time, there have been over 750 studies examining the effectiveness of cooperative, competitive, and individualistic learning strategies (Johnson & Johnson, n.d., para. 44). At its core, CL consists of a group of students working together to learn subject matter, so it includes formal group activities like LCs and jigsaws as well as quick and informal activities, such as think-pair-share. What matters most is that “Cooperative learning is... built on the belief that students learn better when they learn together” (Natasi & Clements, 1991, para. 2). However, it is important to note that not all group activities meet the qualifications of CL. As Slavin (1991) notes, “It is not enough to simply tell students to work together. They must have a reason to take one another’s achievement seriously” (p. 73). It is up to the teacher in the classroom to create an environment for positive collaboration and to implement the key concepts when assigning learning tasks.

According to Johnson & Johnson (1989), there are five key ingredients that educators must include in order for CL to be successful:

- Positive Interdependence—students are collaborating in such a way that the group cannot succeed unless all group members contribute and learn. In order for CL to succeed, “Group members realize... that each person’s efforts benefit not only him- or herself, but all other group members as well” (Johnson & Johnson, n.d., para. 38).

- Individual and Group Accountability—the group is accountable for meeting its goals, but individuals in the group are accountable for their contributions to the group effort. According to Johnson & Johnson (n.d.), “Individual accountability exists when the performance of each individual student is assessed and the results are given back to the group and the individual in order to ascertain who needs more assistance, support, and encouragement in completing the assignment” (para 39).
- Promotive Interaction—group members should be invested in group members’ learning and should take action to support that learning. This can include “orally explaining how to solve problems, discussing the nature of the concepts being learned, teaching one’s knowledge to classmates, and connecting present with past learning” (Johnson & Johnson, n.d., para. 40). It is this positive and focused interaction that separates CL from other group activities in which students divide and conquer to complete assignments with very little interaction among group members.
- Appropriate Use of Social Skills—Teachers must intentionally teach students how to collaborate effectively, which includes direct instruction of social and group skills. In Johnson & Johnson’s (n.d.) experience, “Group members must know how to provide effective leadership, decision-making, trust-building, communication, and conflict-management, and be motivated to use the prerequisite skills” (para. 41). Furthermore, it is important to explain to students that CL is more difficult than independent work because they must learn subject matter while also employing the appropriate social skills. Therefore, it is okay for

students to struggle and for them to require assistance, especially when first learning to work together.

- Group Processing—Throughout the process of CL, group members should engage in reflection about whether or not they are meeting their goals as well as what adjustments can be made in order to improve. More specifically, “Groups need to describe what member actions are helpful and unhelpful and make decisions about what behaviors to continue or change” (Johnson & Johnson, n.d., para 42). However, students should engage in this carefully in order to maintain positive working relationships among group members and to avoid heated emotions. Before groups can engage in this manner of processing, they must first have the requisite social skills to navigate those conversations.

To those key ingredients, Slavin (1991) added his three concepts for Student Team Learning, which also falls under the category of CL: team rewards, individual accountability, and equal opportunities. The individual accountability piece is similar to the individual and group accountability ingredient in Johnson & Johnson’s (1989) work, but Slavin (1991) adds that there should be team rewards that all group members share in because of the team’s success, and teams should have equal opportunities to receive awards. For example, it would not be effective to have teams of students engaging in CL for the sake of competing for one prize that will only go to the winning team. The scarcity of prizes then turns the CL activity into one focused more on competition to complete a task rather than on collaboration to ensure that each student learns.

When students engage in CL, they consistently perform higher than students who are engaged in the same task using individualistic or competitive learning structures (Hattie, 2009; Johnson et al, 1981; Johnson & Johnson, 1985; Johnson & Johnson, 2002; Slavin, 1991; Slavin

1996). Furthermore, these findings are consistent across grade levels; in all core subjects; in urban, rural, and suburban schools; and for low, middle, and high achieving students (Johnson & Johnson, 1985; Johnson & Johnson, 2002; Slavin, 1991; Slavin 1996). Based on these studies, as long as teachers are using research-backed strategies and structures for CL, they should see academic gains in students regardless of the teaching context or of students' ability levels. Furthermore, CL has been shown to help students develop intrinsic motivation, self-esteem, and positive views of school and learning in general, so there are social and emotional benefits to this learning structure even beyond academics (Johnson et al, 1986; Slavin, 1980).

### **Literature Circles**

The concept of having students talk about books does not have a specific origin in the history of education, but the specific layout of LCs was popularized by Daniels (2002) in his seminal book *Literature circles: Voice and choice in book clubs and reading groups* (first published in 1994). His definition of LCs is as follows:

Literature circles are small, peer-led discussion groups whose members have chosen to read the same story, poem, article, or book. While reading each group-assigned portion of the text (either in or outside of class), members make notes to help them contribute to the upcoming discussion, and everyone comes to the group with ideas to share. Each group follows a reading and meeting schedule, holding periodic discussions on the way through the book. When they finish a book, the circle members may share highlights of their reading with the wider community; then they trade members with other finishing groups, select more reading, and move into a new cycle. (p. 2)

In the years since Daniels popularized LCs, there have been numerous studies demonstrating their effectiveness in increasing student engagement, eliciting authentic and critical responses to

literature, teaching students collaboration skills, and even increasing standardized test scores (Almasi, 1995; Coffey, 2012; Eeds & Wells, 1989; Daniels, 2002; Klingner, Vaughn, & Schumm, 1998; Short, 1997). In addition, in 1996, the Standards for the English Language Arts issued by the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association “strongly endorsed literature-based, collaborative classrooms where students take increasing responsibility for choosing, reading, and discussing books (and other texts)” (as cited in Daniels, 2002, p. 7). The research demonstrates that LCs are an effective strategy, and teachers have developed numerous adaptations to suit the needs of their particular students. Throughout Daniels’ (2002) book, he features stories of LCs with students of different age ranges and with various adjustments to suit teachers’ styles or students’ specific needs.

While Daniels’ (2002) book covers a variety of LC situations, his book does not cover any versions that include technology integration. However, this has been heavily researched in the years since the most recent edition of Daniels’ book was published. There is a lot of variety in how teachers implement traditional LCs, so the addition of technological components introduces even more options for implementation, such as a digital method of completing role sheets or response logs, synchronous chat groups during class, asynchronous group posts outside of class, blended models with both synchronous and asynchronous digital elements, or book projects that require students to demonstrate 21st century skills.

There are many interesting action research studies on LCs with technology integration, but Day and Kroon’s (2010) research is of note because of its hybrid model for discussions. Groups of students alternated between face-to-face discussions and virtual discussions using threaded discussion boards in order to discuss their books. Day and Kroon wanted to create “a literary environment in which we valued our digital natives’ ways of knowing” (p. 18), and the

students responded positively to the opportunity to take their discussions online. At the end of the school year, students compared and contrasted their experiences with both kinds of LC structures:

Overwhelmingly, students favored the online discussions versus the face-to-face discussions. In a final survey, 27 students said they preferred the online discussions, six said they liked the face-to-face, and six students suggested there should be a combination of face-to-face and online discussions for each book round. (p. 27)

As a result, the authors decided to structure their LCs with both online and face-to-face components in order to accommodate students who prefer in-person conversation due to slower typing skills and to accommodate students who prefer the online method either because of being shy, wanting more time to think before responding, or not wanting to be interrupted.

While Day and Kroon's findings were primarily based on student preferences, Larson (2009) also used a hybrid structure in her research, but she specifically looked at the kinds of responses that students made during threaded discussion board LCs. Her findings demonstrated that students' posts "were conversational and interactive" (p. 646) due to the ability to use texting shortcuts and emojis to convey emotion in ways that are not possible with formal, academic language. While Larson initially insisted that students use formal language in their posts, the students found this restrictive, and she reasoned that the shortcuts and emojis allowed students to express themselves in similar ways as facial expressions, body language, and informal language afforded in face-to-face conversations. Thus, she required formal writing for other components of the LC unit, but students were free to express themselves as they chose (within reason) during their threaded discussions. Other researchers have also found that LCs

with online discussion components give students practice with using and interpreting new literacies (Grisham and Wolsey, 2006; Larson, 2008; Scharber, 2009).

Larson's (2009) analysis of students' threaded discussion posts also revealed that the online discussions were more thoughtful and in-depth than regular class discussions because the students "carefully read and contemplated the opinions of others before submitting a thoughtful reply" (p. 646). Similarly, Beeghly (2005) experimented with having adult students in her graduate literature classes participate in threaded discussion boards in addition to their participation in their face-to-face classes. The students noted that the online discussion helped them to better understand the texts as well as to engage in better discussion with their peers because the threaded discussions "gave students time—time to think before responding, time to gather and organize their thoughts, and time to voice their thoughts fully without interruption" (p. 16). The face-to-face discussions in Beeghly's courses were a good starting place for conversations about literature, but it was in the threaded discussions that students were able to write critically about their texts and gain new insights by interacting with each other over an extended period. The depth of analysis and critical thinking in the posts as opposed to in face-to-face discussions in both of these studies indicate that the ways that teachers structure LC meetings can influence the type of conversations that the students have and the level of critical thinking and reflection that students demonstrate.

In addition to using technology for threaded discussions, there have also been a variety of studies on collaborative projects to share students' work with the wider world and to help students develop 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills (Day & Kroon, 2010; Edmondson, 2012; Larson, 2008; Moreillon, 2009). Edmondson's (2012) study is of particular note because rather than having students do a technology-assisted extension project at the end of the unit, students

collaborated on group wikis over the course of the entire unit. At home, students read, completed their role responsibilities, and posted their finished work on the group's wiki page for that specific role. In this way, all group members had access to everyone's notes. During class, students worked on group assignments to add to their wikis, such as creating a thematic home page and writing an author's bio page. After finishing the book, students completed one last assignment, which was a take on the typical theme essay. Students worked together to write the essays using the resources that they had amassed on their wikis, and they published the essays online for the class to read. Edmondson found that "The virtual community plays an important role in quality control" because students are writing for an audience of their peers (p. 45). In addition, Edmondson observed that "Overall, the elements of community and choice incorporated into the wiki project intrinsically motivated students and generated a sense of responsibility to one another" (p. 48). This finding about intrinsic motivation is also supported by earlier research on technology-enhanced LCs (Carico, Logan, & Labbo, 2004; Day & Kroon, 2010; Larson, 2008; Moreillon, 2009)

All of the studies referenced above are based around face-to-face instruction during a regular school day and then either access to computers during class to complete the digital components or a requirement for students to complete those digital requirements at home. However, Whittingham's (2013) research involved fully online LCs in a distance learning college class. He had his students do synchronous chat room discussions to talk about their graduate education textbook on the history of adolescent literature, and students completed role sheets in preparation for the discussion. He found "that literature circles provided a social atmosphere for discussions which led to the development of a community of learners" (pp. 57-58). The community aspect is one of the key features of in-person LCs, so his discovery that this

could be replicated in a fully online class is significant. He also noted that “Literature circles transformed my tedious and oftentimes boring discussion board discussions into meaningful, social, small group discussions full of cooperative learning” (p. 58).

The research on traditional LCs is exhaustive, and in the last twenty years, researchers have developed best practices for LCs that incorporate technological components within the context of a brick-and-mortar classroom. There have also been a few studies on fully online LCs in the college setting. However, there are no studies on fully online LCs in the high school English classroom.

### **Threaded Discussion Boards**

Based on Day and Kroon’s (2010) findings about the effectiveness of hybrid LC structures as well as Larson’s (2009) and Beeghly’s (2005) findings that students’ responses in online discussions were more thoughtful and thorough than in face-to-face discussions, I decided to use a hybrid model for my unit structure. Half of our LC meetings were live discussions in Zoom, and the other half were threaded discussion board conversations conducted via Canvas.

McVerry (2007) defines threaded discussions as “online conversations people have by posting topics and responses to web pages called forums. Participants consider each topic a thread, and the replies to a topic as ‘strings’ of conversations” (p. 79). This strategy for digital discussion has been studied in educational research since the late 1990’s, so there is a broad range of studies demonstrating the various benefits. Research shows that they increase student interaction in online courses (Andresen, 2009; Edelstein and Edwards, 2002; Joyner, 2012; Mandernach et al., 2007; Rizopoulos & McCarthy, 2009), foster critical thinking and reflection (Arend, 2009; Meyer, 2003; Rizopoulos & McCarthy, 2009), create opportunities for teachers to authentically assess student learning (Vonderwell et al. 2007), and help students learn content

and meet learning goals (Blackmon, 2012; Dennen, 2005; Robinson, 2011). Threaded discussion boards have also been shown to create stronger classroom communities than face-to-face discussions alone as long as students are encouraged to post quality, in-depth responses (Beeghly, 2005; Grisham & Wolsey, 2006; Larson, 2008; Larson, 2009).

In addition, Vacca et al. (2017) note that one of the main reasons why threaded discussion boards are so effective is that they “allow students the time to search for and gather information as well as read, think, and reflect on the topic or question before responding” (p. 43), which is supported by the work of Larson (2009) and Beeghly (2005). This is especially important for students who, for a variety of reasons, struggle to share their ideas and contribute during face-to-face discussions (Larson & Keiper, 2002; McNabb, 2007). Teachers are not able to assess all students’ comprehension and mastery of learning goals via a face-to-face discussion if not all students are able or willing to participate. Threaded discussions, on the other hand, level the playing field, and give all students ample time to think through their responses, reply meaningfully to peers, and demonstrate their understanding.

As teachers create lessons and units involving threaded discussion boards, McVerry (2007) recommends following five stages of implementation: choosing a platform, organizing the discussion, modeling the necessary skills and strategies, facilitating the conversations, and assessing students’ work. In the first stage of deciding on a platform for discussion, the main deciding factor should be the security features. The threaded discussion board should be accessible to students but also password protected so that only the teacher and the students are able to see and reply to posts. In the second stage, teachers need to decide on the learning objectives for the discussion as well as how to structure the discussion. This planning will determine the types of questions to ask as well as how students will engage with the questions.

For example, teachers could organize a large class discussion in which all students answer one discussion question and then reply to peers' posts, which would result in an in-depth discussion of that one topic. Another strategy might be to put students in smaller groups and have each group respond to a different question. There is also the option of setting up smaller groups but then empowering students to post their own discussion questions for each other, which is the format most often used for LCs with a threaded discussion component.

The third stage in McVerry's suggested plan is to model the necessary skills, which is a step supported by other research as well (Wolsey, 2004). This is vital—even though students might be familiar with this forum style discussion outside of school, they need specific instruction on how to engage with this discussion format in an academic context. Engaging thoughtfully in threaded discussions requires “students to question, locate, analyze and communicate information, but they also build the knowledge and skills of new literacies” (McVerry, 2007, p. 80). In addition, the process of learning content in a threaded discussion board is different than in other forms of writing or discussion (Larson & Kaiper, 2002). Therefore, when students are first learning how to participate in threaded discussions, it is important to model how to use the technology as well as to show students examples of thoughtful posts and conversations that meet the teacher's expectations. To this, Vacca et al. (2017) add that teachers should clearly explain the rules and conventions for the online discussions, such as how many posts students are required to make, how many sentences or words a post should contain at a minimum, whether students are required to write in formal English, and whether new literacies (emoticons, images, etc.) will be permitted.

The fourth step in McVerry's (2007) process is to facilitate the conversation. Larson & Kaiper (2002) found that if students are not given specific guidance to respond to each other's

posts, they tend to only write declarative responses to the teacher's discussion question rather than reading through the existing posts in order to add to what other students have already said. Thus, part of a teacher's facilitation should be to encourage responses that further the conversation rather than ones that only declare the student's opinion. Additionally, it may be necessary for teachers to nudge students along if students are in a circular debate or if the discussion seems to have fizzled out. However, teachers should be careful to facilitate rather than take control of the conversation. Threaded discussion boards have the benefit of allowing students to assume more authority in conversations (Warschauer, 1999), so teachers should ensure that their comments are helping students improve while also honoring students' autonomy.

The fifth and final stage of McVerry's (2007) threaded discussion board process is assessment. This assessment should include the quality of the post itself, any developing literacy skills, and students' understanding of the content being discussed. In addition, students should be involved in the assessment process so that they can engage in meaningful reflection and set goals for future improvement (Klemm, 2005). To that end, creating a student-friendly rubric can set clear expectations for students' posts as well as help students reflect on and assess their own work (Edelstein & Edwards, 2002, McVerry, 2007; Vacca et al., 2017), and those rubrics can change over time as the objectives for the discussions develop. For example, when students are first learning to engage in threaded discussions, it might be helpful to have a rubric that focuses solely on whether or not students have met the qualifications of a good post. Later on, however, a teacher might want to minimize that aspect on the rubric in order to focus more on students' analytical writing or their mastery of content.

Due to the increased prevalence of internet access and devices in the home, many teachers have turned to threaded discussion boards as a way to extend classroom learning beyond the four walls of their classrooms and beyond the time limits of their class periods (Larson & Kaiper, 2002). However, teachers should note that while this online discussion format can save class time by moving conversations online and making them homework assignments, this can put a strain on students. Larson & Kaiper explain this extensively in their analysis of data from a three-year study on the benefits and challenges of threaded discussions vs. face-to-face classroom discussions:

From the students' perspectives, threaded discussions are more labor intensive than face-to-face discussions. In class, students will discuss an event for part of a class session. They may have to write a reflection or summary of the class discussion as homework, but the discussion has ended. Because the threaded discussion occurs solely outside of class time, all interactions are homework. Since speaking is quicker than typing, and listening to someone often takes less time than reading a comment, the time students spend outside of class for threaded discussions increases more. Students participated, but they did complain that the threaded discussions were labor-intensive. Many felt as though they were checking e-mail, and often did not have the energy or time to respond to the class comments. (para. 43)

Teachers should be aware of the time demands that good threaded discussions require, and Larson & Kaiper also recommend that these discussions take place over several days—at least three—and that the teacher should designate a specific day for the discussion to end and for assessment to begin. Hypothetically, a threaded discussion could last for an entire semester, so it is necessary for the teacher to carefully consider and assign a time limit for the discussion.

Covid-19 forced teachers to think outside of the box and to quickly adapt to online learning in order to protect ourselves and our students. However, as a silver lining, it did provide an opportunity to expand the research on LCs to include those that are conducted entirely online in a high school setting. All of the studies referenced above on the topics of CL, LCs, and threaded discussion boards have informed my thinking and my practice regarding how to successfully implement fully online LCs in the high school English classroom. This study aims to determine the benefits and challenges of conducting such a unit as well as to determine which components most contribute to student learning. This will add to the existing research on CL, LCs, and threaded discussion boards as well as significantly expand the research on fully online LCs, which have not been studied extensively in the high school setting. This study will also help to build a model for implementing online LCs that other teachers can institute informally in their classrooms or that teacher researchers can formally study in a variety of other educational contexts.

## CHAPTER 3

### Methodology

The methodological framework for my study of online LCs is action research. According to Manfra (2020), “Action research methodology follows a systematic and intentional cycle of problem posing, action, observation, reflection, and sharing. Action researchers ask and answer questions that emerge from issues related to everyday practice” (p. 4). Ideally, conscientious teachers are already reflective practitioners who consider the impact of their teaching methods and strategies on student learning. Action research simply allows teachers to conduct a more in-depth study of the causes and effects of different aspects of their teaching, their community, or the education system in general in order to create change and to share those results with stakeholders and other educators. As Manfra points out, “Whereas traditional research reports are written from the perspective of outside researchers, action research focuses on [the] insider knowledge” (p. 134). This empowers teachers to develop more expertise in their content and in the field of education. Additionally, action research gives teachers the confidence that comes with knowing that their teaching is proven effective.

Due to the context-specific nature of action research and the tenet that students and teachers are co-constructors of knowledge within action research studies, I have centered my study around social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978) as my theoretical framework. According to Koshy (2010), “Action researchers are actively engaged in a process of *construction*. Their constructions are based on all the data they collect. They negotiate meanings which emerge from their interpretations” (p. 23). Koshy also notes that an action researcher’s constructivist stance is part of what makes action research different from more traditional, objective research:

As constructivists, they will not be claiming that what they interpret and present are ‘whole, absolute truths’, but meanings of what they see and hear. Their constructions will be affected by their ideas and values and by the context they work in. (p. 23)

Rather than trying to control contextual factors, as is done in more traditional research, action research affords students and teachers the unique opportunity to reflect on what happened in a particular time and place and with particular people in order to investigate learning outcomes. As such, throughout the action research study, I elicited student feedback multiple times and encouraged the students to respond openly and honestly to survey questions. Because we were all constructors of knowledge in this study, their perspectives and insights were just as valuable as mine. As Manfra (2020) notes, “By remaining open to different points of view and perspectives and seeking to understand how participants construct their realities through social interaction, the researcher can develop a more nuanced understanding of human experience” (p. 48).

Using the recursive process of action research methodology and the theoretical framework of social constructivism, I sought answers to the following questions.

1. What are the benefits of conducting online literature circles in a distance learning environment?
2. What aspects of online literature circles most impact student learning?

Additionally, while it was not originally my intention to study the challenges of online LCs, this topic came up naturally in my observations as well as in students’ work and survey responses, so I added it as a third research focus.

Furthermore, the implementation of LCs was founded on a combination of theoretical frameworks within educational thought. Daniels (2002) explains that “the activity called

literature circles draws on three main streams of thinking: independent reading, reader response theory, and collaborative learning” (p. 33). First, if the ultimate goal is to encourage life-long reading and learning, teachers must prioritize independent reading of whole books rather than short excerpts just for the sake of answering test prep questions. Daniels says that “This kind of time— time to ‘just read’— has been largely absent from most skill-and-worksheet driven classrooms” (p. 34). While many teachers with packed curriculum guides may not see the value in carving out time for independent reading, it is a research-backed classroom strategy that has been proven to increase students’ comprehension and reading achievement (Allington, 2000; Cunningham & Allington, 1998; Fielding & Pearson, 1994).

Second, in teaching students to operate within LCs, teachers must empower students to create their own responses and to come up with topics that they want to address, not just find the “one correct interpretation.” Rosenblatt’s (1976) transactional theory of literacy posits that there is no single interpretation to any text. Instead, meaning evolves as a result of the interaction between the reader and the text. Students need to be able to make personal connections to literature before they can move on to analysis, and keeping this in mind can help teachers recognize the difference between off-topic conversations and conversations in which students are making genuine connections to characters and situations in their books.

Third, collaboration should be at the heart of every LC. Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of social development considers the role that human interaction has in constructing knowledge and fostering understanding. When students share their connections to their books and how they interpreted certain parts, they broaden each other’s perspectives. Different students will notice different things as they read, and when students bring their observations up in their group discussions, everyone benefits. In addition, students having to collaborate over an extended

period of time gives them the opportunity to work through rough patches, set goals together, and solve problems as a group. These skills are helpful for students in the present, and they are vital in any career or educational context.

Finally, although independent reading, reader response, and collaboration are the underpinnings of regular LCs, the addition of technology requires teachers to consider the roles of new literacies and 21st century skills. According to the International Reading Association (2009), in order to be considered fully literate in the modern world, “students must become proficient in the new literacies of 21st-century technologies. As a result, literacy educators have a responsibility to effectively integrate these new technologies into the curriculum, preparing students for the literacy future they deserve” (p. 2). The shift to distance learning necessitated the use of more technology than ever before, but teachers must carefully consider how they use technology and whether it is simply replacing traditional methods or whether it is transforming the educational experience in order to educate students in new literacies and 21st century skills. Based on my literature review, online LCs have the opportunity to elicit different kinds of responses from traditional LCs and to give students practice in employing new literacies in order to express themselves fully (emoticons, text shortcuts, gifs, memes, etc.) and in consuming new literacies in order to expand their understanding of their books (videos, Google Maps, charts, etc.).

### **Context of Study**

This action research study on fully online LCs took place in the fall of 2020 with my English 1 Honors students. My school operates on a block schedule, meaning that students have one load of courses in the fall and then they start with a new course load in the spring. My students came from a variety of middle schools and had little familiarity with each other at the

beginning of the semester. However, the LC unit of study took place during the last unit of the semester, so I had gotten to know the students by then, and they were relatively familiar with each other. All of my students were invited to participate, and 31 students completed both the assent form and had a parent complete the consent form. The demographic data for the 31 participating students is included below in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographic Data*

Race/Ethnicity		Gender	
# Black	18	# Female	21
# Hispanic	12	# Male	10
# White	1	# Total Students	31

Beyond demographics, the largest context for this study is the fact that my classes in the fall of 2020 were entirely online due to the Covid-19 pandemic—a first for me and my students. To my knowledge, there have been no action research studies conducted on LCs in a fully online ELA high school classroom, so there was no existing model to replicate. Instead, I gathered best practices from a variety of sources in order to find a solution that worked best for my students and for me. Because there are so many different ways to implement LCs, below I describe how I structured my unit in our online environment. This will provide necessary context for understanding the data collection and analysis portions of the study.

Before getting into the unit structure, it is necessary to understand that our classes operate on ninety minute blocks, and teachers could choose how to distribute that time between whole-class Zoom discussions, group work, independent work, individual conferences, etc. Teachers could also choose to assign students asynchronous work and not have Zoom classes on a

particular day. During our ninety minutes designated for English, students completed all of the collaborative parts of LCs, and they read and completed their reading logs outside of class.

In Daniels (2002) seminal work on LCs, he outlines eleven key ingredients:

1. Students *choose* their own reading materials.
2. *Small temporary groups* are formed, based on book choice.
3. Different groups read *different books*.
4. Groups meet on a *regular, predictable schedule* to discuss their reading.
5. Kids use written or drawn *notes* to guide both their reading and discussion.
6. Discussion *topics come from the students*.
7. Group meetings aim to be *open, natural conversations about books*, so personal connections, digressions, and open-ended questions are welcome.
8. The teacher serves as a *facilitator*, not a group member or instructor.
9. Evaluation is by *teacher observation and student self-evaluation*.
10. A spirit of *playfulness and fun* pervades the room.
11. When books are finished, *readers share with their classmates*, and then *new groups form* around new reading choices. (p. 19)

I was able to incorporate all of these ingredients except for number eleven, which is for classrooms that exclusively use LCs for reading instruction. Beyond this one exception, my plan included the other components with modifications for distance learning. Furthermore, in addition to teaching two traditional units in which all students read the same book, I was able to conduct two separate LC units. The first was a trial run, and I mainly used it to get feedback from students about what was working thus far and what needed to be adjusted in the future. It consisted mainly of threaded discussion posts, mini lessons, reflection activities, and a

summative writing assignment. The second LC unit was the focus of the action research study for this thesis, and in that unit, I made improvements based on students' insights and my own observations, such as to include synchronous discussion in Zoom breakout groups, to incorporate a whole-class text, and to include more group analysis activities beyond the discussions.

In the unit of study, students had the choice of five different books that followed the hero's journey structure (Campbell, 1949), which was the thematic focus of the unit. The book selections were as follows: *Children of Blood and Bone* by Tomi Adeyemi, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie, *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho, and *Dear Martin* by Nic Stone. These selections were based on the availability of hard-copy books in our school's possession, and I narrowed down to these five books based on the diversity of cultures represented as well as the wide range of Lexile levels.

Students ranked their first, second, and third choices using a survey feature in Canvas. When I made the groups, I focused on giving as many students as possible their first choice. However, it was sometimes necessary to give a student his or her third choice if there were not enough students who chose their higher ranked selections. I explained the process to students, and encouraged them to read reviews of the book options and to use the Amazon website to read the first few pages if they were undecided about a book. Once the groups were established, students completed their first activity by working together to set up their LC document, which is included in Appendix F. This process involved creating a reading schedule, setting expectations for group work, and establishing norms for discussions. In addition to reading their LC books, students also read *The Odyssey* graphic novel by Gareth Hinds, which was our whole-class text.

Rather than having students complete role sheets in preparation for LC meetings, I followed Daniels' (2002) suggestion to teach students how to write open-ended reading logs in which students could choose the kinds of responses they wanted to make: "Logs fulfill the same cognitive and social tasks as the role sheets, but without narrowing kids' thinking to one kind of response at a time" (p. 56). The response log entries were due before class began on a LC discussion day, and the instructions for students' entries are included in Appendix G. I also scheduled a mini lesson toward the beginning of the unit in which we went over how to create open-ended discussion questions so that students could successfully prepare for all of their circle discussions.

Based on Day and Kroon's (2010) feedback from students as well as Beeghly's (2005) and Larson's (2009) findings about the kinds of responses that threaded discussion boards elicit from students, I structured the unit to include both asynchronous threaded discussion boards in Canvas and synchronous discussions in Zoom breakout rooms. Students participated in three of each kind of discussion for a total of six LC discussions spread across three weeks. The threaded discussion boards were scheduled to take place over three days in order to allow plenty of time for students to post and reply to each other as well as to accommodate any family emergencies or technology issues that might cause delays. On Mondays in the unit, students came to class for a quick mini lesson as well as a reminder of the expectations and the due dates for their different posts. Then students left the Zoom class to start their group discussions by posting at least one original question for their group members. During this time, I remained in Zoom to assist any students who needed help coming up with a question or who wanted to review their question with me before posting it. Additionally, once the end of the class period was nearing, I messaged students in Remind if I still did not see their posts. On Tuesdays, students completed the second

round of the discussion by replying to all of their group members' original questions. Finally, on Wednesdays, students checked back on their original discussion question in order to reply to any peers who responded. While the posts were ongoing, students were tasked with continuing to read their LC books as well as reading designated portions of *The Odyssey* graphic novel. On days two and three of the threaded discussions, students also had time to work in their groups to complete the hero's journey tracking chart, which was included in their LC documents (Appendix F).

The synchronous Zoom breakout group discussions happened each Thursday in the unit. On those days, we started class with a mini lesson of some sort before reviewing how the conversations would be assessed as well as the expectations for live discussions, namely to share the conversation as equally as possible and to keep the conversation going for the entire 20 minutes allotted. As I mentioned above, students set expectations and norms at the beginning of the unit for how their discussions would operate, and this was especially important for the live discussions. Because I chose to not assign role sheets, students had more freedom in their discussions, but that also could have led to confusion. In order to avoid that, I gave students some options for how they might run their discussions, such as using a form of LC jobs, applying a strategy called "Save the Last Word for Me," or designating a facilitator either for the entire meeting or different facilitators for different portions of the meeting. Students had the flexibility to adjust based on the needs of the group.

Through all of the students' discussions, both synchronous and asynchronous, I acted as a facilitator. On the first day of the threaded discussions, my main role was checking in with students who had not posted during the class period. On the second day, I read the discussions and left comments to answer questions that the group members were not sure about and to

provide additional context where necessary. I also sent individual messages to students who were missing posts. Finally, at the end of third day of the threaded discussions, I read the full discussions and left comments to provide positive reinforcement for students who were demonstrating different kinds of responses or who were trying out discussion strategies, such as respectfully disagreeing. If any students needed correction, I left a private comment for that student or scheduled a conference for us to talk about the issue.

For the synchronous discussions, I visited each Zoom breakout group to observe and take notes. I did not take part in the discussions unless students specifically asked me something or unless I saw something that needed to be addressed. After the students finished their main conversations, I asked groups to reflect on how their discussions went and to set a goal for the entire group for next time. The students also were tasked with going into their group document and setting a personal goal that they wanted to improve on in the next discussion. At subsequent synchronous meetings, students started off by reflecting on their goals and considering ways that they could achieve their goals during the meeting.

Once students finished with their reflections and goal setting activities, we came back together as a group to share out. This is another strategy that comes from Daniels (2002) book. Even though all groups read different novels, they could still have a whole-group conversation about the process of LCs, give suggestions for other groups, and describe strategies that were working well in their group. Daniels (2002) suggests that this can be a time “to help kids notice what’s happening in their groups, to make decisions about what is useful and not-so-useful behavior, and to make plans for future improvement” (p. 89). This whole-class discussion was vital for continuing to build community not only in LC groups, but also in the entire class.

Another aspect of my unit that is not included as a key ingredient but which Daniels recommends is the mini lesson, which I have mentioned briefly in the paragraphs above. He notes the differences between procedural mini lessons, which are lessons on the procedures that make LCs run smoothly, and literary mini lessons, which are lessons that help students pay attention to authors' craft (p. 87). On LC days, we always started class with a mini lesson. I did not go into the unit with set lessons to teach; rather, the topics of our lessons arose out of my observations during unit activities. I started with a lesson on writing open-ended discussion questions before our first asynchronous discussion board. Later in the week, we did a lesson on how to keep conversations going in an extended academic discussion because I knew from the beginning that students would need help with that. Other topics arose out of what I saw in the students' threaded discussion and breakout sessions. For example, in the first threaded discussion board, a number of students struggled to go beyond "I agree" when replying to group members who answered their questions. In order to help students write more thorough replies, I created a mini lesson to provide students with strategies and a resource to refer to if they struggled with this in the future. Over the course of the unit, students participated in mini lessons on writing thoughtful discussion questions, keeping the conversation going, expanding shorter discussion replies, analyzing plot development, using research to enrich the reading experience, and analyzing book endings.

In addition to reading their LC books, students also read *The Odyssey* graphic novel illustrated by Gareth Hinds as a common text. This reading assignment served two purposes. First, it helped students to dig deeper into the unit theme, the hero's journey story structure. By exploring one of the original models for this archetype, students were able to more thoroughly analyze their own LC books and discuss how authors continue to use this story structure in

modern novels. Second, by having a common text for the entire class to work through together, we were able to have meaningful whole-class discussions throughout the unit rather than only having the smaller LC groups work together. On days when students had ongoing threaded discussion boards, we spent part of our class discussing *The Odyssey* as a class and then dividing into LC groups to make connections to students' books. This also included working on their hero's journey tracking sheet that was included in their group documents (Appendix F). The primary purpose of the assignment was to help students engage in focused analysis of their books, but the tracking chart also had the secondary purpose of helping students prepare for the summative writing assignment at the end of the unit in which students compared and contrasted their LC books to *The Odyssey*. Students had a variety of prompts to choose from, all of which connected back to the hero's journey. Thus, while students were working on their group assignment of tracking the different stages of the hero's journey, they were also gathering quotes and notes that they could then use for the writing assignment at the end of the unit. I have included the assignment sheet in Appendix H.

All of the adjustments detailed above made it possible for students to have engaging and collaborative LCs in a fully online environment. I took Daniels' (2002) key ingredients for LCs and adjusted them to my particular context along with suggestions from his book and from other action research studies on LCs with online components. This particular structure for conducting LCs was the context of my study, and one of my goals for the study was to learn which specific strategies listed above most contribute to student learning.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

In this unit, data collection and analysis were ongoing in order to reflect and adapt the unit to best suit the needs of the students. Mills (2001) recommends this, stating, "Action

research studies provide teacher researchers with data that can be used formatively and summatively; that is, much of the data collected during the study can be used to positively affect teaching throughout the study” (p. 124). Rather than waiting until the end of the unit to analyze the data and realize that one aspect of our unit structure was causing complications for students, I wanted to talk to students about what was working and what was not working so that we could make adjustments while the unit was ongoing. After the unit was completed, I analyzed participants’ survey responses and LC discussion contributions.

According to Rust & Clark (2007), teachers should “use at least three different tools [for data collection and analysis]... This is done for the purpose of triangulation” (p. 13). In my action research study, I had three main data sources: surveys (pre-, mid, and post-unit), copies of the threaded discussion board conversations, and transcripts of portions of the live Zoom breakout room conversations. I also kept a teacher research log where I kept notes about how the unit was going and what I would like to adjust in future LC units. I used mostly qualitative methods of data collection along with a few quantitative strategies, such as using Likert scale questions on the pre- and post-unit surveys and conducting a frequency analysis of students’ written responses in surveys as well as of their synchronous and asynchronous discussion contributions.

One of my research questions concerned the benefits of conducting online LCs in a distance-learning environment, so I thought that it would be important for students to experience traditional units in which students all read the same texts but in an online context. As such, I structured my unit plans to include teaching two typical units before conducting the action research study. As Manfra (2020) suggests, this allowed me to collect “baseline data and then compare student outcomes by analyzing before and after data” (p. 59). Furthermore, I did a trial

run of a LC unit before the action research study in order to work out the major issues and to allow students to give feedback on their experiences that might shape how I structured the second LC unit. My four units over the fall semester of 2020 were ordered as follows:

Unit 1: Whole-Class Study of *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Unit 2: Trial Literature Circle Unit about Culture Clashes

Unit 3: Whole-Class Study of *Julius Caesar*

Unit 4: Action Research Literature Circle Unit about the Hero's Journey

After finishing the third unit, I asked students to complete the pre-unit survey for the action research study unit. This survey is included in Appendix A. The post-unit survey is also included in Appendix C. In order to create these two surveys, I followed Manfra's advice to "develop a blueprint... From this starting point, researchers should create at least one question for each of the issues listed" (pp. 117-118). Keeping this strategy in mind helped me to plan my survey questions in order to generate data that would answer my research questions. I also structured some of the questions in the pre- and post-unit surveys to be the same in order to be able to directly compare students' responses across the two main surveys. I included a combination of multiple choice, Likert scale, and open-ended questions in order to get quantitative data that was easy to interpret quickly and represent visually in charts and graphs as well as written responses that allowed a broader range of expression. For the written responses in the surveys, I followed Mills (2001) advice on how to code data: "Consider the big picture and start to list 'themes' that you have seen emerge in your literature review and in the data collection" (p. 129). My thematic categories for the survey responses mostly consisted of the benefits and problems that students brought up in the LC unit. I then conducted a frequency analysis of the written responses in order to understand the number and percentage of students who were noting certain benefits or issues.

The mix of both quantitative and qualitative questions and data analysis gave me a broad range of data to sort through, and in many ways, the different methods complimented each other and allowed me to make even more insightful conclusions than I would have otherwise been able to do with only using one method of data analysis.

When I began, it was my intention to take time to conduct brief, formal interviews with all students. Rust & Clark (2007) define such interviews as “those that you script for yourself prior to the interview—you ask the same questions of everyone to whom you talk and you ask these questions in the same order” (p. 10). However, as a result of a power outage on my first scheduled interview day as well as other delays, I decided to change course and conduct a check-in survey with the same interview questions that I would have used with students in a synchronous Zoom meeting if time had allowed. This mid-unit survey is included for reference in Appendix B. Because all of the questions were open-ended, I did the same thematic coding and frequency analysis procedures for these responses as I did for the other open-ended responses from the pre- and post-unit surveys.

In addition to the surveys, I also kept a teacher research log in order to “systematically record events, experiences, and reflections... continuously throughout the project” (Manfra, 2020, p. 79). I mainly used my research log to take notes while I was listening in to the synchronous Zoom breakout group discussions, but I also made general observations about the threaded discussions and wrote reflections about how the unit was going, changes that I would want to make in future units, and plans to resolve issues that arose during the unit of study. While the teacher log was not a large source of data in the study, it did help me to be a reflective practitioner. In addition, many of my observations and notes during the unit corroborated the later findings from analyzing the other data sources.

My final source of data consisted of the screenshots of asynchronous threaded discussions as well as excerpts of the transcripts of synchronous discussions. I reviewed the contributions that students made in their LC conversations in order to determine the benefits of these two different styles of discussion and whether one was better than the other when conducting fully online LCs. As with the written responses to survey questions, I thematically coded students' individual contributions in the LC conversations in order to create categories of the types of questions and responses that students were posting/saying as well as the discussion skills that students were exhibiting. I then did a frequency analysis to see how many times students' responses fell into those thematic categories. Mills (2001) practically suggests that data analysis "is a process of digesting the contents of your qualitative data and finding related threads in it... To make the kinds of connections needed to analyze and interpret qualitative data, you must know your data" (p. 127). I certainly found that to be true while sorting through the 37 pages of transcripts from the live discussions and the 133 pages of screenshots from the Canvas discussion boards. While tedious, this turned out to be one of the most important data sources of the unit in determining the benefits of conducting online LCs by examining the kinds of analysis and discussion skills that students were practicing with and demonstrating mastery of in their discussions.

## CHAPTER 4

### Findings

The findings of this research have been divided into five categories: Pre-Unit Survey Findings, Live Discussion Data, Threaded Discussion Data, Mid-Unit Survey Findings, and Post-Unit Survey Findings. My research log was also a source of data in this study, but rather than covering it separately, I added notes from my research log to the end of the Live Discussion Data section since it was the focus of the majority of my notes. I had a total of 31 student participants, and all participants' responses are included in the Pre-Unit Survey Results, Live Discussion Data, and Threaded Discussion Data sections. There were a few student participants who did not complete the second and third surveys in the unit; I have found that students missing assignments is one of the larger struggles of online learning. For each data set, I have stated the total number of participants included. Additionally, Tables 2-11 in this section include direct quotes from students' surveys and discussions, and there is also a full threaded discussion included as an example. All of the participants' names from the quotes and from the threaded discussion have been replaced with pseudonyms.

#### Pre-Unit Survey Findings

This action research study took place during the last unit of my English 1 Honors course. At that point, students had participated in two more typical units in which the entire class focused on one text, and they had also participated in a trial LC unit in the first quarter. In that trial unit, all meetings were threaded discussion boards because at that early point in the semester, I was not sure if attendance in Zoom was going to be a major issue, and the threaded discussion boards allowed students to participate even if they were not able to be in the Zoom

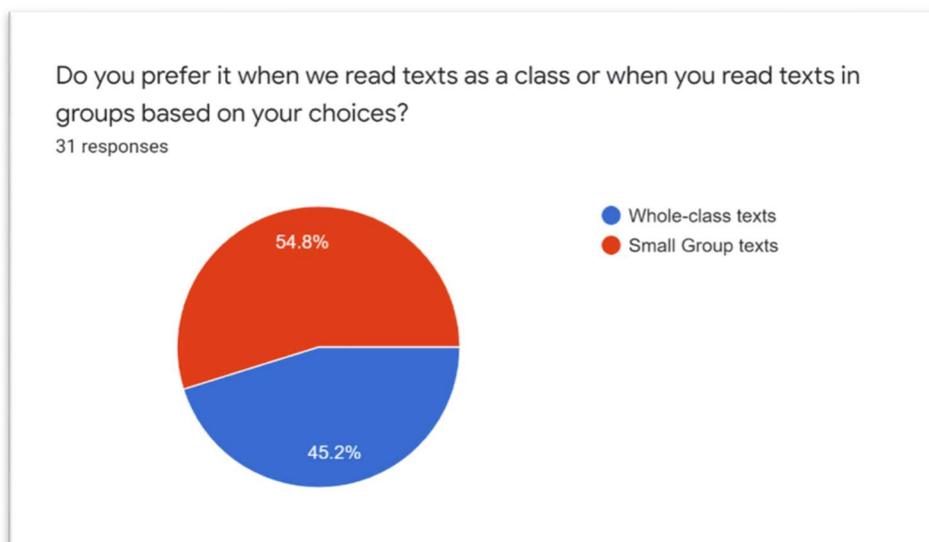
classes. However, based on student feedback and consistently high attendance from all students throughout the first quarter, I felt confident instituting live meetings in the second round of LCs.

Before starting the unit of study, students completed a short pre-unit survey in order to provide feedback from the previous LC unit as well as for them to offer suggestions about the upcoming unit. Action research is all about working with the students in order to discover the most effective teaching practices, so I wanted to be open to feedback from the beginning. All 31 student participants completed this survey.

In the first question of the survey, students were asked whether they preferred whole-class texts or small group texts, and the instructions clarified the difference for any students who were confused by the phrasing. The results are recorded below in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Student Preferences for Unit Structures*



In the next question, students were asked to explain their preference for either whole-class texts or small group texts. I separated the responses into two groups based on whether students chose whole-class or small group texts, and from there, I used inductive coding to group students'

responses into thematic categories. I then did a frequency analysis to determine how many responses fit into each of the thematic groups. Among students who preferred small group texts (17 students), four categories emerged: 1) Less stress (35%), 2) Collaboration and discussion (29%), 3) Choice of books (29%), and 4) Motivation (6%). Table 2 illustrates a representative sample of student responses in these categories.

**Table 2**

*Student Reasons for Preferring Small Group Texts*

Reason for Preferring Small Group Texts	Sample Student Responses
Less Stress 6 Students 35%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I would rather work in small groups because it can be easier to talk to just these few people. Also I feel as if we get things done easier and faster we can also work at our own pace.”</li> <li>• “I prefer small-group texts because working in smaller groups usually takes some pressure off of explaining your opinions or analyzing texts. Also, small groups have more diverse answers, at least from my experience.”</li> </ul>
Collaboration and Discussion 5 Students 29%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “With a small group text, I can interact with my group more.”</li> <li>• “I think it's easier and more enjoyable with friends.”</li> </ul>
Choice of Books 5 Students 29%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I like to choose what books I read rather than just be assigned one. This option gives me more freedom as to what I can read for the unit.”</li> <li>• “I chose small group texts due to the variety of book choices.”</li> </ul>
Motivation 1 Student 6%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I like to read in small groups mainly because I can focus more, knowing that I have to read at some point.”</li> </ul>

Among students who preferred whole-group texts (14 students), five distinct categories emerged: 1) Easier to help others and get help (43%), 2) More perspectives from classmates

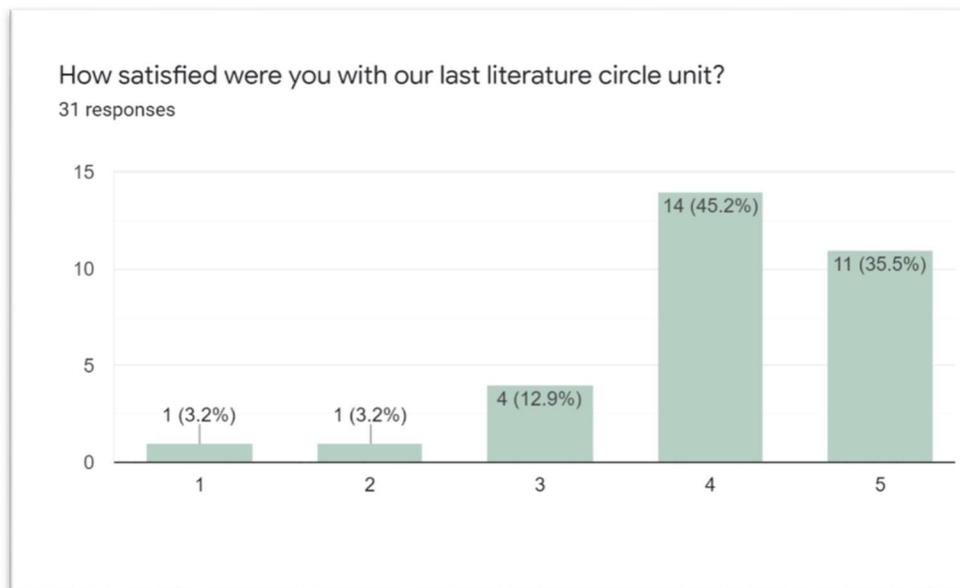
(21%), 3) Disliking group work (14%), 4) Simplicity (14%), and 5) No justification provided (7%). Table 3 demonstrates a representative sample of student responses in these categories.

**Table 3**

*Student Reasons for Preferring Whole-Class Texts*

Reason for Preferring Whole-Class Texts	Sample Student Responses
Easier to Help Others and Get Help 6 Students 43%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I like to do the whole class texts because I feel that if a peer needed help it would help for them if they could ask any of their classmates rather than 3 or 2 of their classmates.”</li> <li>• “I’d rather be reading with the class since it’s easier to reach out if I’m confused.”</li> </ul>
More Perspectives from Classmates 3 Students 21%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “You get more perspectives in my opinion, and it’s easier to talk out in a bigger group.”</li> <li>• “I like to see others’ comments about what we read about.”</li> </ul>
Disliking Group Work 2 Students 14%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I don’t like to have to rely on and talk to other people.”</li> <li>• “I don’t really like working with other people, so when we get to do a whole group text, we don’t have to break apart as much.”</li> </ul>
Simplicity 2 Students 14%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Personally, I like both options for different reasons; however, I chose whole-class texts because they tend to run a bit smoother than small group texts.”</li> <li>• “Just more simple.”</li> </ul>
No Justification Provided 1 Student 7%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I just think it is better.”</li> </ul>

The next question in the pre-unit survey asked students to rank their satisfaction with the previous LC unit on a 1-5 scale with 1 being dissatisfied and 5 being fully satisfied. Their responses are detailed in Figure 2 below.

**Figure 2***Student Satisfaction with Previous Literature Circle Unit*

In the next question, students were asked to explain their number choice for the question above. In order to understand students' reasons for enjoying the previous LC unit as well as their reasons for decreased satisfaction, I did two rounds of inductive coding. In the first round, I coded the responses of students who ranked their satisfaction at a 3 or higher in order to determine reasons for their satisfaction, and this included 29/31 responses. Five categories emerged from this round of coding: 1) General satisfaction (48%), 2) Enjoying their book (21%), 3) Positive group interaction (21%), 4) Deeper thinking (7%), and 5) Enjoying the structure (3%). Table 4 includes a representative sample of student responses demonstrating their reasons for finding satisfaction in the previous LC unit.

**Table 4***Reasons for Satisfaction with the Previous Literature Circle Unit*

Reasons for Satisfaction with the Previous Literature Circle Unit	Sample Student Responses
General Satisfaction 14 Students 48%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “It was okay, I personally just don't like reading.”</li> <li>• “It was good for the most part.”</li> </ul>
Enjoying their book 6 Students 21%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I LOVED MY BOOK! And seeing how my teammates think was pretty cool as well.”</li> <li>• “I enjoy my literature circle book. I learned new things from different people.”</li> </ul>
Positive group interaction 6 Students 21%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “It was fun. I liked being able to work with a group, and it helped me to stay on task because of the questions &amp; the fact that if I was a little late, it could affect all of my group members.”</li> <li>• “My last group was really good and they kept up with their work and reading. We also had good conversations based on the book.”</li> </ul>
Deeper thinking 2 Students 7%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I really enjoyed talking to my group members about our book and sharing my feelings about the certain chapters too. I also like answering each other's questions because it makes me think about the story a little deeper, so this is why I give the last literature circle unit a 4.”</li> <li>• “Seeing everyone's views and questions on the text allowed me to see from different perspectives and helped me grow in my critical analysis skills.”</li> </ul>
Enjoying the structure 1 Student 3%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “It went smooth and I liked how you set up out discussions.”</li> </ul>

In the second round of inductive coding, I gathered the responses of students who ranked their satisfaction as a 4 or lower in order to determine the reasons for their dissatisfaction with the unit. This consisted of 20 different responses from students. In that grouping, five categories

emerged again: 1) Group issues (40%), 2) General satisfaction—no specified reason for the lower ranking (40%), 3) Personal problems (10%), 4) Wanting more time to read (5%), and 5) General dissatisfaction—no specified reason for the lower ranking (5%). Table 5 illustrates a representative sample of student responses in these categories.

**Table 5**

*Reasons for Dissatisfaction with the Previous Literature Circle Unit*

Reasons for Dissatisfaction with the Previous Literature Circle Unit	Sample Student Responses
Group Issues 8 Students 40%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I would have liked if we had in person discussions, and it was a little frustrating when certain people wouldn't post their discussion question until days after.”</li> <li>• “I chose 4 because overall it was good, but it took some time to get done because everyone posted at different times and some didn't post at all.”</li> </ul>
General Satisfaction—No Specified Reason for the Lower Ranking 8 Students 40%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “It was ok there was nothing wrong with it.”</li> <li>• “It was cool. I'm not entirely too sure how to answer this, but last unit wasn't too grueling and was mostly, ‘Hey this assignment is due in a couple days; do it and we'll discuss after.’”</li> </ul>
Personal Problems 2 Students 10%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “It was new to me and I wasn't the best at replying to my peers in time, and posting the questions in time. I just have to be more prepared.”</li> <li>• “Sometimes I had problems when making discussion questions, but that was all!”</li> </ul>
Wanting More Time to Read 1 Student 5%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I liked the book option, but honestly it would be better to have more time to read the book. 2 weeks is short and I feel rushed.”*</li> </ul>
General Dissatisfaction—No Specified Reason for the Lower Ranking 1 Student 5%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “It wasn't as fun, and I didn't enjoy it very much.”</li> </ul>

Analyzing data from this pre-unit survey helped to shape my approach in the action-research study. Knowing that 40% of respondents expressed issues with group work, especially with students not posting or responding on time, I made it very clear to students that one person being delayed in the group would not affect other group members' grades. Additionally, on days when students had threaded discussion boards, I checked in with students who had a history of turning in late work in order to offer assistance and give a gentle reminder for them to get their posts done.

As we went into the unit, it was also helpful to know that a majority of students were satisfied with our previous LC unit (94% rated it as a 3 or higher). Even among the 14 students who preferred whole-class texts, 79% of those students (11 total) were either highly (4/5) or fully (5/5) satisfied with the previous unit. Therefore, their choice of whole-class texts was more about personal preference rather than dissatisfaction with the previous LC unit. Additionally, it was encouraging to see that students who preferred small group unit structures were already able to identify benefits (less stress, better collaboration, and more student choice) of such units in an online setting. Finally, the first LC unit was very much a trial run. If it went that well with no experience and no student feedback guiding the initial unit's planning, I knew that the second LC unit, with my lessons learned and with valuable insight from students, would be a powerful learning experience. Once I had the unit structure and components in place, I was able to focus on the benefits and challenges of conducting online LC units as well as the aspects of such units that most contribute to student learning.

### **Live Literature Circle Discussions**

Throughout the unit, students participated in three live LC discussions, which occurred via Zoom. At the beginning of each class, I went over a mini lesson on a discussion or analysis

skill for students to practice applying in the day's discussion, and we reviewed the expectations for their discussions. Then students went into their breakout groups with the task of engaging in a twenty-minute academic discussion of their books.

Originally, it was my intention to record all twenty minutes of each Zoom discussion in order to be able to fully analyze the discussions later. However, Zoom only allowed me to be in one room at a time, and I thought there would be logistical difficulties with getting students to record and send me their entire conversations or the entire chat record. In addition, some groups used a mix of both chat and aloud discussion, which would have been difficult for students to capture. For the sake of simplicity, I decided to observe each group for at least five minutes of each synchronous meeting. If group members spoke aloud, I recorded the conversation in order to write up a transcript later and then deleted the recording. If group members used the chat, I added the chat conversation to the document with the audio transcripts but made a note that it was a chat conversation. If students used a mix of speaking aloud and posting in the chat, I made a transcript of the recording and included any posts from the chat.

### ***Live Discussion Data***

In order to analyze the discussion contributions of the 31 student participants, I did a round of inductive coding to categorize skills that the students exhibited in the discussions as well as problems that I observed. This involved reading through the transcripts multiple times and making copious notes about the different skills that students were exhibiting. After that, I completed a frequency analysis in order to note how many times students demonstrated a certain discussion or analysis skill. Table 6 features the results from those two rounds of coding as well as sample student contributions. The table is color coded as follows: green—types of questions

that students asked; purple—types of responses that students provided; and blue—discussion skills exhibited in the LC meeting.

**Table 6**

*Skills Exhibited in Live Literature Circle Discussions*

Skill Exhibited	Number of Times Exhibited	Sample Student Responses
Character Motivation Question	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “My last question is what do you think motivates the shepherd to continue his journey after he lost all of his money and sheep?”</li> </ul>
Opinion Question about Text-Specific Incident	8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “How do you feel about the older lady continuing to talk to Christopher, despite her being a stranger?”</li> </ul>
“In a Character’s Shoes” Question	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Well my next question was if you were the one who saw the birds up in the air fighting, and you know how that became a big symbol for what was happening next, if you saw that, would you take that as a symbol or just an act of nature?”</li> </ul>
Character Development Question	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “After reading through most of Manny and Justyce’s relationship, how do you think it has developed? What were some breaking points in their relationship?”</li> </ul>
Prediction Question	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “So you know how Justyce went through all that and saw his best friend get shot? Do you think he’ll ever recover from that? And will it make him even more scared of the police?”</li> </ul>
Clarifying Question	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Are we talking about Inan or the king?”</li> </ul>
Making a Claim	42	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Her sister is escaping but not for anything better, just to stop the feelings of sadness most people experience on the rez.”</li> </ul>

Table 6 (continued).

Specific Text Reference	18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“He is still trying to find his purpose in life, I guess I would say. For example, he talks about becoming a shepherd and traveling, but it seems like at this point that’s all he’s been doing. And even now that he’s started to travel to outside of his boundary, he’s starting to find out new things, like there’s actually people in the world who want to steal from you and don’t really care. I think he’s a good person, but he’s still trying to find who he is.”</li> </ul>
Directly Quoting from the Text	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“This idea from Junior is also based on prejudice, not actual facts. There is a school mentioned at the beginning of the book where Junior says, ‘it’s another school on the west end of the reservation, filled with poor Indians and poorer white kids.’ This means that there are circumstances where white people suffer as well, but what most people connect with white people is opportunities.”</li> </ul>
Making a Text-Based Inference	29	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“I don’t think it could be for other reasons because she stayed at their house sometimes and she cooked for them.”</li> </ul>
Making a Prediction	21	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“I feel like she’s going to be a good example for Justyce in the long run or be a good friend or maybe even girlfriend. I feel like she’s really going to give him a lot of hope through his life.”</li> </ul>
“In a Character’s Shoes” Response	18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“I probably wouldn’t accept her, but I would probably want to get to know her a little bit more. That doesn’t mean that I would forgive her or anything.”</li> </ul>
Making a Real-World Connection	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“It really just got to me, and it shows that in reality and in the real world, there’s still ignorance that surrounds people who are part of the majority who aren’t completely informed of the struggles that minorities go through, so when he brought up affirmative action and how it is, I’m pretty sure he said exactly how it discriminates against members of the majority it was just outrageous to me.”</li> </ul>
Making an Emotional Connection	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“For me, I was slightly enraged the way that he spoke so confidently in bringing down Justyce’s accomplishments.”</li> </ul>

**Table 6** (continued).

Seeing a Character's Perspective	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I had to step out of my own point of view and try to see it from somebody who benefits from being part of the majority, but even then I feel like we have to step out of our own comfort zones to learn about other points of view, but he didn't do that.”</li> </ul>
Providing Clarification	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “The one that killed the first cop was Manny's cousin.”</li> </ul>
Facilitating the Conversation	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Umm, Maria, Alyssia, do you guys have something that you want to add?”</li> </ul>
Building off of a Classmate's Response	33	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Yeah, I definitely agree with both of y'all and how you talked about how he might as well just keep going at this point. I forgot what the book said was his actual motivation—I can tell you when we come back towards the end because I wrote it down somewhere.”</li> </ul>
Referring to a Classmate by Name	14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I agree with you, Ayden. I feel like the contrast in their characters shows different perspectives of the same situation.”</li> </ul>

As indicated above, there were thoughtful conversations about character motivation and development; in-depth discussions about how race, social class, and gender impacted the characters and the plot; empathetic considerations of what students would do if they were in similar situations as the characters in their books; text-based predictions about what the author would do next in the book; and so much more. In preparing students for the unit, I reminded them that this was a chance for them to showcase all of the discussion and analysis skills that we had been working on together in our whole-class units as well as skills that we focused on in this unit. Table 6 clearly portrays that students demonstrated a broad variety of analysis and discussion skills. There are certainly skills that students need more practice with, such as directly quoting from the text to support their claims. However, overall the students were engaging in focused, academic discussion of their books in which they chose all topics for discussion and in

which they interpreted the text for themselves as well as adjusted those interpretations based on conversations with peers. In my teacher research log, I made a note about how the LCs were providing students with opportunities to practice skills from class in an authentic way and preparing them to think critically and solve problems in their groups. Rather than having to discuss character motivation because that was what their teacher decided for their discussion questions, the students were able to demonstrate authentic mastery of that analysis skill by choosing to create questions about that topic and engaging in academic debate about a character's reason for action.

In addition to students demonstrating mastery of skills, the synchronous discussions were also thoroughly enjoyable to witness. One of Daniel's (2002) key ingredients for LCs is that "a spirit of *playfulness* and *fun* pervades the room" (p. 19). While my students and I did not have a brick-and-mortar room in which to have our discussions, our Zoom breakout rooms were certainly places of happiness and laughter. Students were excited about the discussions, sometimes debating who would begin the conversation because all of the group members were eager to share their discussion questions. In addition, even when students were talking about difficult topics, such as racism and sexism, happy might not be the best word to describe students, but they were certainly passionate. It was clear that they enjoyed being able to voice their opinions and to have their peers validate their interpretations of the text. I recall leaving nearly every breakout room with a smile on my face because of my joy at students' lively discussions and because of their care in facilitating to other students so that everyone was able to take part in the conversation. This was in stark contrast to other breakout room activities that I planned for students earlier in the semester as a part of traditional units. In my own experience, I recall many times where I would visit a breakout group where students were supposed to be

discussing a certain discussion question or arriving at their own interpretation of a text only to hear nothing spoken aloud and to see nothing posted in the chat. When I asked students why they were not discussing, the answer would often be that they had divided the assignment and were working independently, this despite the clear instructions to actually collaborate rather than dividing and conquering. Another common answer was that they were already finished discussing, even if there was a significant amount of time remaining for students to work together. As Johnson & Johnson (n.d.) note, “Placing people in the same room, seating them together, and telling them they are a group does not mean they will cooperate effectively” (para. 34). That holds true for virtual settings as well, but our online LC unit was able to create a more positive environment for collaboration and discussion even among students who were apprehensive about and inexperienced with such collaboration earlier in the semester.

### ***Challenges in the Live Discussions***

Of course, not everything was perfect in our live discussions. There were a small number of students who either barely participated or who did not participate at all even when group members directly invited them into the conversation. However, those students were not involved in the study because they did not fill out one or both of the required permission forms, so I was not able to analyze those situations in more depth. Of the student responses from those involved in the study, I noted two problems during the live discussions. The first problem was that on four different occasions, three of the group members were speaking aloud while one was participating via the chat. The issue was that the students speaking aloud were not incorporating the student in the chat into their discussion. This seemed to be due to the time delay of typing a response—in three out of four of these situations, the student writing in the chat posted a response to a previous discussion topic while the other group members had moved on chatting about another

question. In the final situation, the student was posting about a topic while other students were still on that topic. However, the problem in common in both of these situations was that the person posting in the chat was being ignored completely, and I do not have the data to definitively explain why that might be. My takeaway from this as a teacher researcher was that it was not an effective strategy to have some students speaking aloud and others contributing solely in the chat, especially due to the high speed of speech and the much slower speed of typing. Members of a group either need to speak aloud or use the chat rather than trying to do a combination of both. The only successful combination that I observed was one group who posted their discussion questions in the chat so that group members could refer back to them, but then they discussed aloud. This was a highly effective discussion technique and one that I will recommend to future students.

The other problem was less of an issue because it only occurred once. In the first synchronous discussion, there was a student who had not come prepared with a discussion question. When his group members asked him to share his question, he replied that he did not have a good one in mind and that he needed a moment to think. Another group member stepped in to share her question, and the conversation continued. Of the snippets of conversations that I observed, this only occurred once, and this particular student came to all other meetings with multiple questions prepared. One of my observations about LCs is that even when an issue arises, that can be a positive experience because it allows groups and students to learn from their mistakes and solve problems, which is what happened with the student who was not prepared for the first meeting. During the reflection time, group members suggested that everyone bring in multiple questions next time, and this group continually improved throughout the unit.

One final observation about live LCs comes from my teacher log notes as well as my thorough analysis of students' conversations aloud and in the chat box. When all students participated aloud, the conversation was usually much more productive. In order to give students more choice and autonomy in the unit, I gave students the option of speaking aloud in the breakout rooms or using the chat—they just needed to establish one or the other as a conversation norm so that group members would know how they needed to participate. However, on multiple occasions in my teacher research log, I noted how slowly the chat conversations were going. At one point, I made a note that I had been in a breakout group for 5 minutes, and there had only been 5 posts in the chat. At that pace, students could not have had a meaningful conversation over the course of 20 minutes. There was one group that seemed to use the chat feature well, and students were posting every few seconds. However, that was a rare occurrence. Moving forward, I will share this information with students and encourage more groups to speak aloud in their discussions. I will also consider ways to help students make their chat conversations more productive. Due to the context of Covid-19 and the issue of students being forced into online learning, it was unrealistic to expect that all students would have quiet workplaces where they would feel comfortable speaking aloud in a discussion. Numerous students contacted me personally to ask for the option to contribute via chat because they were in a noisy environment or because they were having to watch their younger siblings while also participating in our live LC discussions. In other teaching situations where all students have opted for online learning, it would be more acceptable to require all students to speak aloud during their synchronous conversations, and my observations indicate that this would lead to better discussions. However, during the Covid-19 pandemic, teachers needed to be especially

understanding of students' home situations and willing to accommodate students so that they could participate in virtual classes in ways that worked for them.

### **Threaded Literature Circle Discussion Boards**

Throughout the unit, students participated in three threaded discussions that occurred via Canvas. These discussions took place over three days in order to give students plenty of time to make their posts and to accommodate any technological or family emergency issues that arose. This three-day time limit on discussions was based on student-feedback, my observations during the first LC unit, and findings from Larson & Keiper (2002) about the optimal length for threaded discussions. On the first day of a discussion board, we started class with a synchronous Zoom meeting in order to go over expectations for the discussions and to work through a mini lesson. Then students left the Zoom class in order to post their original discussion questions in the discussion board, and I remained in Zoom to assist any students who needed help creating their questions. On the second day, students replied to each of their group members' original questions. Finally, on the third day, students replied to all group members who answered their original discussion question(s). Some discussions included students making additional posts but most involved only the three required rounds of posts. In addition, based on student feedback about frustration with group members not posting on time in the previous LC unit, I made a concerted effort to send whole-class Remind messages about post deadlines as well as individual messages to students who were delayed in making their posts.

### ***Threaded Discussion Data***

In order to analyze the discussions, I completed the same inductive coding and frequency analysis process as with the live discussions, and many of the same categories emerged along with some new categories. The contributions from the 31 participants included 525 separate

posts from students spread across all three threaded discussion boards. Table 7 depicts the results from the coding, and the table is color coded as follows: green— types of questions that students asked; purple— types of responses that students provided; and blue— discussion skills exhibited in the LC threaded discussions.

**Table 7**

*Skills Exhibited in Literature Circle Threaded Discussion Boards*

Skill Exhibited	Number of Times Exhibited	Sample Student Responses
Character Motivation Question	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“What do you think made Manny and Justye both finally beat up their white peers for being racist?”</li> </ul>
Opinion Question about Text-Specific Incident	36	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“Do you think Tzain is overreacting about protecting Zelig or do you think it is her fault? Also, do you think Inan loves Zelig enough to fight off his father for Zelig?”</li> </ul>
“In a Character’s Shoes” Question	18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Seeing how things are going for Justyce, do you think if he did join the gang what would be some good things that might come from joining but also state some negative consequences that might come. Also, what would you do if you were in his shoes?”</li> </ul>
Character Development Question	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“You can obviously see that Inan’s opinion on the maji as a whole has shifted dramatically because of this journey. What do you think was the turning point for him to change his opinions on the maji?”</li> </ul>
Prediction Question	27	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“As we know now that Christopher made it safely to his mom’s house, do you think his dad will make him come back? And if yes, do you think he will do it in a violent way or do you think they will let him go? And if no, what do you think the dad will do to try to get his son back with him?”</li> </ul>
Author’s Purpose Question	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“Why do you think the author chose to tell the story from a third person point of view rather than from the shepherd’s?”</li> </ul>

Table 7 (continued).

Book Structure Question	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “When Christopher found Wellington dead, how do you think it affected him? How did this event help structure the book?”</li> </ul>
Interpretation of a Quote Question	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “After having a conversation with Jus about the bad imate of him on the news, Doc states, “They need to believe you’re a bad guy who got what he deserved in order for their world to keep spinning the way it always has” (Stone 151). What do you think Doc meant when he said this? How is it relevant to the events in the book and to situations that have occurred in real life?”</li> </ul>
Symbolism Question	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “The word <i>Maktub</i> is repeated many times to Santiago and has stuck with him since the beginning of his journey. What importance does the work have and what do you believe it symbolizes?”</li> </ul>
Inference Question	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Considering Christopher’s dream, how do you think this reflected Christopher’s mindset towards his independence and most importantly his relationship with his father?”</li> </ul>
Real World Connection Question	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “In the chapter called ‘Slouching Toward Thanksgiving,’ Mr. Dodge doesn’t believe what Junior says about petrified wood until Gordy confirms that it is true. What does this tell us about how minorities’ education may be perceived by others?”</li> </ul>
Personal Connection Question	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “In the story there was a sentence that states, ‘I’m afraid that it would all be disappointment, so I prefer to just dream about it.’ How can you relate to this?”</li> </ul>
Emotional Reaction Question	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “How do you feel about the fight Chrtopher and his father had?”</li> </ul>
Comparison Question	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “You can definitely see similarities between <i>The Hunger Games</i> and the competition that was shown in the book. What are some of the main similarities and differences between the citizens of the Capital in <i>The Hunger Games</i> and the royalty in Orisha from the novel?”</li> </ul>
Text Example Question	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Throughout the book, the author has hinted that Christopher has autism, and you can come to that conclusion by reading those hints. What hints made you think that Christopher has autism, and what confirmed your suspicion?”</li> </ul>

Table 7 (continued).

Clarifying Question	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Hi, Lee. I don’t really understand what you are saying in this reply. Could you add on?”</li> </ul>
Making a Claim	129	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I think he can to some extent, and that extent would be him just trusting his gut because I think he is really just having like some feeling that something is going to happen, if that makes sense. But unrealistically, he probably can, although it might also be a figure of speech, so maybe he’s saying he is in close contact with his heart or his emotions.”</li> </ul>
Specific Text Reference	60	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “At first when Christopher got noticed by the police, I thought the policeman was going to find out the second he was there, which he only seemed to find out once Christopher was in the train. That is the part that kind of got me confused because of all the information Christopher was giving to the policeman. I think on the parts where Christopher was kind of struggling, he used things to distract him from the complications, for example, we see throughout this part of the book that Christopher was using math as a distraction.”</li> </ul>
Directly Quoting from the Text	23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Well both parties made a good point. SJ’s side is the one I would side with. I love when she says, ‘In order to do that, they have to be able to afford boots.’ This makes an interesting point. In my personal experience, me as being a Hispanic, people automatically assume everything. They say we’re immigrants, don’t belong here, and that we work in any construction or landscape. That isn’t accurate.”</li> </ul>
Making an Inference	46	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I think she didn’t want Justyce to bring a white girl home because of the history of black people and white people. She also could’ve taken into account the experience Justyce has had with police officers like Officer Castillo and Officer Tison. This may have made her feel a certain way about white people in general, which is understandable.”</li> </ul>
Making a Prediction	49	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I think later in the book, Christopher is going to get homesick and forgive his father even though he did bad stuff and realize that his dad has been with him through everything.”</li> </ul>
“In a Character’s Shoes” Response	46	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “No, I wouldn’t. Though I would be scared, I wouldn’t think it would be the right idea to put someone on the spot like that unless I 100% know that he could do it. I also just couldn’t trust anyone with my life in their hands.”</li> </ul>

Table 7 (continued).

Making a Real-World Connection	40	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“I agree, Arturo. In fact, it’s almost like they feel they are superior to minorities, and in this case, specifically African Americans. It has so much relevance to the events in today’s world, especially as the BLM movement grows.”</li> </ul>
Making a Personal Connection	27	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“Not necessarily, Eli! I’ve never been able to dig down deep and express how I feel to someone other than God. Like Justyce, there has always been something that held me back from speaking to others about my problems. I think this is a good question!”</li> </ul>
Making an Emotional Connection	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“I would’ve been really shocked. It’s kind of scary finding out that his mother might still be alive and her death may have been a lie. Me as a reader, I am pretty shocked, and I’m really interested if she really is alive. If I were to put myself in Christopher’s shoes, I would be shocked and petrified.”</li> </ul>
Making a Connection to Another Text, Class, or Unit	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“I thought the same thing, Nia. There’s a saying that goes, “We are only as blind as we want to be” (Maya Angelou). I think this has some connection to what Justyce is going through because while he was aware of the injustices African Americans faced, he saw the reality and more in depth experience of what it really is like once he was handcuffed. This type of experience is not one a person can forget, especially when everyday they have a certain anxiety that comes with just walking around.”</li> </ul>
Seeing a Character’s Perspective	20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“I think so too. I think the father was coming from a hurt place when telling Christopher that his mother was dead. She left him to care for Christopher all along, but I think he shouldn’t have told Christopher his mother was dead.”</li> </ul>
Providing Additional Research	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“Yes, a white person in this situation would’ve most likely been treated differently. Due to society’s stereotypes of both white and black people, a black person is treated with more violence and brutality by police officers. We’ve seen several examples of this in the real world, for example Jacob Blake (a black male) and Kyle Rittenhouse (a white male). For info on both cases: <a href="https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/04/us/kenosha-protests-jacob-blake-rusten-sheskey-invs/index.html">https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/04/us/kenosha-protests-jacob-blake-rusten-sheskey-invs/index.html</a>”</li> </ul>

Table 7 (continued).

Providing Clarification	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“Junior is born with too much cerebrospinal fluid. This causes him to have many medical problems, which includes having 42 teeth, being nearsighted in one eye and farsighted in the other, his head, feet, and head are abnormally large, he is “susceptible to seizure activity,” and he also has a stutter and a lisp. He mostly gets bullied for having a stutter and a lisp, but he was also bullied for having a big head.”</li> </ul>
Noting How a Group Member’s Post Caused a Change in Perspective	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“I agree with your way of thinking. This is a different way of thinking than what I thought. By his actions, it does show a sense of shyness or a type of person who would hold their head down if approached. I do also agree with the fact that he felt if he said anything wrong, he would be in the wrong.”</li> </ul>
Building off of a Classmate’s Response	186	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“I agree. I think the father was going through a lot at the time to make such decisions. Although it wasn’t very good to lie to Christopher about his mother, I can see the emotions he was going through.”</li> </ul>
Disagreeing Respectfully	20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“Yeah! I slightly agree with you, Lorenzo. If they want to take the case to court, the judge might decide on Christopher’s will (which is to live with his mother), but it’s not fair for the dad also. He was looking out for his son while his wife had an affair and left to live with another man. However, I agree with you that his father can’t force him to leave his mother’s house.”</li> </ul>
Referring to a Classmate by Name	117	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“I agree with you, Candice. I also thought that Amari was going to get in the way all of the time and be the type of character that messed everything up. Now though, we can see that she is a strong and fierce girl that is perfectly capable of taking care of herself.”</li> </ul>
Thanking a Group Member for a Post	13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“Thank you for responding, Evelyn! I love this response. The number one thing in a relationship is to grow and become better, as a couple and individually. Justyce has definitely grown as a person over the course of the book, so I think it will work too.”</li> </ul>
Acknowledging a Thoughtful Post	30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“Good point, Nia! I totally agree and couldn’t have said it any better, because just like you said, they need a reason to continue living in their peachy world and not have to worry about others (they as in racists).”</li> </ul>

In reading and analyzing students' responses in the threaded discussion boards, I made particular note of the variety of question types as well as the variety of responses that students provided. The students' work exhibited the academic skills that we had been going over all semester, such as how to make a claim and support it with specific references to the text or direct quotes from the text. Students' responses also demonstrated reading strategies that we had practiced together, such as making predictions, putting ourselves into the characters' shoes, and making connections to our lives, the real world, and other texts. Furthermore, the students' responses exhibited many of the discussion skills that we went over in mini lessons in this unit, such as how to ask different types of discussion questions, build upon previous responses, disagree respectfully, use classmates' names in responses, thank group members for their posts, and acknowledge great posts from other students.

In addition, by comparing this data to the live discussion data, I was able to draw interesting conclusions about live vs. threaded discussions. However, it is important to note that in the case of the live discussions, I was only able to witness and record  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the students' conversations, but with the threaded discussions, I had access to all of the students' posts. That should be taken into consideration when comparing the number of times certain skills were exhibited in the live vs. the threaded discussions.

In comparing the live discussion data to the threaded discussion data, I expected every single category replicated across the data sets to increase in frequency in the threaded discussions because of the higher volume of student responses to sort through. However, there were fewer clarifying questions (10 in the live discussions and 3 in the threaded discussions) and fewer responses that provided clarification (7 in the live discussions 5 in the threaded discussions). When students were speaking together at the same time, it was much easier to get clarification

from other students about what they meant or what they were referencing in the book. However, in the threaded discussions, students most often asked for clarification in their third round of posts, and most of the students who asked for clarification did not come back to make an additional post, either because it was not required or because they did not see the post asking for clarification. This does indicate that one benefit to live breakout group discussions as opposed to threaded discussions is that it allows space for students to clear up any confusion.

Another observation is that even accounting for the different number of responses in the base data for the live vs. threaded discussions, there were notably more instances of students quoting directly from the text in the threaded discussions (23) as opposed to in the live discussions (3). Students had more time to go back through the book and find quotes to include in their posts for the threaded discussions because they took place over three days as opposed to in the span of twenty minutes. In live discussions, the pace was much faster, and unless students had quotes already prepared, it would have been awkward to ask group members to wait while a student rifled through a book looking for a specific quote. This indicates that threaded discussion boards are better for text-centered discussion if the goal is to have students directly quoting and referencing the text.

The most notable comparison between the two discussion types is that there were a significant number of questions and responses that emerged in the threaded discussions that were not present in the live discussions. There were 10 new question categories in the threaded discussion data: author's purpose question, book structure question, interpretation of a quote question, symbolism question, inference question, real world connection question, personal connection question, emotional reaction question, comparison question, and text example question. There were also 4 new response categories: making a personal connection; making a

connection to another text, class, or unit; providing additional research; and noting how a group member's post caused a change in perspective. Even keeping in mind the different sizes of the two data sets, having 14 new discussion categories is notable, and this indicates that the slower pace of threaded discussion boards allowed students time to create a more diverse range of questions and to type up more varied responses than they were able to provide in a live discussion. It is also possible that in the threaded discussion boards, students might feel more comfortable trying out new question and response types that they are not as familiar with because they have time to consider their phrasing and to revise their words as many times as necessary before posting their work.

Finally, there were some significant differences in the discussion skills exhibited in live vs. threaded discussions. First, there were no instances of facilitating the conversation in the threaded discussion boards but 7 instances of this in the live discussions, which makes sense because all students were expected to reply to all posts; therefore, there was no need to intentionally invite group members to participate. Second, there were no instances of respectfully disagreeing in the live discussions, but this occurred 20 times in the threaded discussion boards. Third, even accounting for the differences in data sets, there were significantly more instances of students building upon previous students' responses in the threaded discussion boards (186 times) as opposed to the live discussions (33 times). These differences in exhibited discussion skills clearly demonstrate how dissimilar live and threaded discussions are and how they elicit different responses from students.

### ***Challenges in the Threaded Discussions***

In addition to all of the positive skills that students demonstrated in the threaded discussions and the interesting differences between the discussion formats, there were also some

notable issues that arose. There were 25 occurrences of late posts, and if the late posts were meant to be done on the first or second day of the discussion board, this sometimes meant that group members did not have a chance to reply to those posts. In addition, there were 32 instances of missing posts, most of which occurred when students forgot to go back to the discussion board on the third day in order to reply to group members who answered their original question. The late and missing posts occurred despite students having gone through the same process with the previous LC unit and despite me sending class messages on each day of the threaded discussions to remind students to complete their posts. Additionally, most of the missing and late posts came from 3 student participants, and there are too many factors to definitively state why that occurred. 2 of the students contributed thoroughly and thoughtfully in each of the live discussions and only struggled with making their posts on the threaded discussion boards. This indicates that the students were not opposed to group work or discussion as a whole, and their ability to discuss their books in depth during the live discussion indicates that they were engaging with their LC books. It is unclear whether the threaded discussion boards posed a unique challenge to these students, whether the missing and late posts came down to time management, or whether there was some other factor keeping these students from being successful in that component of the LC unit. Due to the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, there were any number of factors that could have led to problems with getting work submitted on time. The final student participated minimally in the live discussions, missed many of the required posts, and submitted some posts that did not meet expectations for length or demonstrate understanding of the text. This indicates a general lack of engagement with the unit as a whole, but again, the reason(s) for that disengagement would be difficult to determine considering all of the factors at play. However, it was clear that Edmondson's (2012) finding that students are more

intrinsically motivated to complete LC work due to interdependence among group members was not replicated in this study. This could be due to the fully online structure of this unit or to a variety of legitimate issues caused by the Covid-19 pandemic that might have influenced students' abilities to manage their time, keep up with assignments, and/or submit their work.

Two final issues that students exhibited in the threaded discussions that I did not observe in the live discussions were off topic questions and responses, which I define as questions or responses that do not reference the book at all. I noted 8 examples of off topic discussion questions and 31 instances of off topic responses. However, most interestingly, all of the off topic conversations resulted in students opening up to their group members about their personal lives and forming authentic connections with their peers, which is something that all teachers are trying to help students do in this online teaching environment. To give an example, below is a discussion about *Dear Martin*.

*An Off-Topic Discussion of Dear Martin*

**Evelyn:** Justyce feels as if he had very few people willing or able to support him. However, this isn't entirely the case, as evidenced by the fact that Doc and Manny have worked together to make sure that he's alright. Doc's fatherly presence doesn't necessarily change anything that has happened, but it's worth noting that Justyce isn't completely on his own, though he most likely doesn't feel fully connected to Doc, who is much older, is half white, and had a PhD—all factors that set him apart from Justyce. Personally, I have a number of strong supporters—my parents, my siblings, my friends—but when it all comes down to it, my biggest supporter is myself. Only I can (or will) truly support myself and push myself forward to achieve meaningful goals in life. It's a lonely existence, but it's also empowering. I was wondering... who's your biggest supporter in everything you do?

**Jamie:** Wow, Evelyn, I love this question and your insightful comment! My biggest supporters are my parents. They push me to do things that they know are good for me. They are also always there for me and never give up on me even when I do. I also agree that I am my biggest supporter, sometimes people (even your parents) will not understand how much something means to you, so you have to be your own supporter in situations because you may be the only one who understands how something is making you feel. I also feel like once we grow up, our parents and our biggest supporters will not be there for us as much as they are now, so we need to start encouraging and pushing ourselves now, because once we grow up, the only person we may have is ourselves.

**Evelyn:** I agree with you, Jamie. Our parents are our first... everything. They brought us into this world and hopefully are guiding your development into the person you are today with as much love, nurturing, and opportunity that they could provide. They made sure that your needs were being met, and they supported and advocated for you while encouraging your gradual independence into a fully autonomous and independent person. They are your history and understand you. They are the baseline for how you have grown and developed your whole life and can speak with authenticity of who you are as a person. Hopefully, they set your moral compass in the right direction by leading by example and demonstrating to you right from wrong and how to navigate life. They are part of your memories and, good or bad, have loved you and had hopes/dreams for you since inception. They can be the tough love to get you back on track, your soft place to fall. Through their eyes, you can see yourself a bit as they do. They passed down not only pieces of themselves and the lessons they have taught, but you can see generations of “you” and the things you wish to replicate, as well as the things you might want to tweak and change. None of us are perfect and parents are no exception. However, that is what life is for... to perfect who we are as individuals, do no harm, love our families and friends, and live as good human beings. Your parents are your first friends, your teachers, and your comfort. They should love you unconditionally till the end of their lives. Like you said, they are our biggest supporters.

**Nadia:** This is very thoughtful commentary, Evelyn! I would say that my biggest supporter is myself. Although I have my parents as my supporters, they at times don't understand the things that I go through. When times are rough, I push myself to stick with things even though I don't want to do them. For example, when I come across subjects that I'm learning that I don't like, I always say, “I won't need this after school.” Then, I tell myself, “I may not need it in the future, but I need it now, so keep working.” This helps me when I'm feeling down and frustrated.

**Evelyn:** I certainly agree with this. I tell myself one of my favorite quotes, “Our greatest weakness lies in giving up. The most certain way to succeed is always to try just one more time.” -Thomas Edison. Or “When everything seems to be going against you, remember that the airplane takes off against the wind, not with it.” -Henry Ford. Motivation reflects something unique about each one of us and allows us to gain valued outcomes like improved performance, enhanced well-being, personal growth, or a sense of purpose. Motivation is a pathway to change our way of thinking, feeling, and behaving. We should keep being motivated even if things get hard. Disappointments and failure happen to everyone. The difference between those who reach their goals and those who don't is staying motivated. If you're motivated, you'll keep going.

**Eli:** Aside from myself, the biggest supporter could be my parents, my best friends, and my brother. They are there for me at any time. The other day, I had a problem and called my best friend at 3 am. She woke up, calmed me down, and helped me work through the problem.

In this discussion, the only reference to the book was in the lead up to Evelyn's question. Her actual question asked for personal responses without specifying that group members needed to also connect to the book, and none of her group members' responses made any mention of the

book. This is a problem if the goal is deep, text-centered discussions. However, I found it difficult to see discussions like this as a serious problem considering the larger issues that students were dealing with:

Most parents (73%) report that COVID-19 has had a very or somewhat negative impact on their teen's ability to interact with their friends... [and] half of parents (46%) say they have noticed a new or worsening mental health condition for their teen since the start of the pandemic. (Canady, 2021, p. 1)

This discussion helped students to open up about their lives, form authentic connections with their group members, and focus on something positive in their lives in the midst of a global pandemic. While this was a problem for text-focused discussions, it was a victory in regards to student engagement and collaboration. Moving forward, I will directly teach students how to ask discussion questions that elicit personal responses while also requiring group members to specifically connect their experiences to the book.

### **Mid-Unit Survey Findings**

My initial goal was to complete semi-structured interviews with all students throughout the unit. However, time constraints and a power outage on one of my interview days soon rendered that impossible. Instead, I decided to have students complete a short reflection assignment that included all of my interview questions. In this way, I was able to get feedback from most students in a short amount of time. There were 4 participants who did not complete this assignment, which was not unusual in our online learning environment. The total number of participants involved in this portion of the study consisted of 27 students. The interview assignment comprised the following four questions:

1. How is everything going in your literature circle group? In your answer, you can consider the threaded discussions, the face-to-face discussions, group assignments during class, or anything else related to your group activities.
2. Which part(s) of the literature circle unit is contributing most to your learning (independent reading, threaded group discussions, face-to-face discussions, mini lessons, reflection activities, collaborative group work activities, independent work with *The Odyssey*, etc.)?
3. Based on what you spoke about in your last response, what are you learning as a result of that aspect of the literature circle unit?
4. Are there any adjustments that I can make to either improve the experience or to help you learn?

In response to the first question, 18 respondents (67%) gave overwhelmingly positive replies, such as this response from a particularly pleased student:

So far everything in my group is going great. We have full participation and everyone is included with what we do whether it's the live or threaded discussions. I like my group members and there have not been any problems so far!

The other 9 students (33%) first remarked that the discussions were going well but then cited some specific issue that they were having in their group. In order to better understand the kind of issues that groups were having as well as the frequency of those issues, I inductively coded those 9 responses that mentioned a specific problem. 5 categories arose from this round of coding: 1) Group dynamic issues (11%), 2) Problems with live conversations (33%), 3) Problems with threaded discussions (44%), 4) Personal time management problems (22%), and 5) Disliking the book (11%). In cases where a response mentioned two issues, I coded that response twice; as

such, the number of responses listed below does not add up to 9 and the percentages do not add up to 100%. The table below includes representative responses from each of the categories.

**Table 8**

*Problems Indicated in the Mid-Unit Interviews*

Problems Indicated by Students	Sample Student Responses
Group Dynamic Issues 1 Student 11%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “The literature circles are going well for the most part, I think the only thing that's hard is people.”</li> </ul>
Problems with Live Conversations 3 Students 33%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Everything is going pretty good except when it comes to the discussions, not everyone fully participates.”</li> <li>• “Our first time during the on Zoom discussions, we were a bit shy and didn't talk much so the conversation died. On the second time, we were still a little shy but not as much as the first time. We were able to keep asking questions and keep the conversation going on a bit longer. Everything is going good.”</li> </ul>
Problems with Threaded Discussions 4 Students 44%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I have really enjoyed the Zoom discussions since that is when I feel there is more participation. The threaded discussions are different since there have been times where not everybody has participated which makes it more difficult to have a good discussion.”</li> <li>• “I think they are going really well. The only thing I am concerned with is people not turning in their work on time.”</li> </ul>
Personal Time Management Problems 2 Students 22%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “It's going fine. I guess I only struggle with the threaded discussions mostly because I don't finish my reading at a reasonable time. With the active discussions it has been moving along great and smoothly”</li> <li>• “It's good, I just feel that I need to post my responses earlier &amp; do things earlier rather than rushing everything.”</li> </ul>
Disliking the Book 1 Student 11%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “It's been going pretty good, I think this literature book sessions are going much better than previously. Though I don't like the book much.”</li> </ul>

This data provided valuable information as I was able to check in with students individually based on their responses. For students who mentioned personal time management issues, I conferenced with them to ask about how they kept up with assignments, and we made a plan to help them stay on track for the rest of the unit. One student decided that using her phone calendar would be helpful while another student went with putting sticky notes on her desk. In both situations, students were trying to use a planner, but they would write down assignments in their planners and then not check the planners regularly. Their responses in this reflection assignment allowed me the information that I needed to support those students and to help them improve.

For students who mentioned that some group members were not participating in live/threaded discussions or that group members were making their posts late, I met with groups in order to brainstorm solutions to the problems. In the chart above, I separated responses in order to determine whether groups were having trouble with a particular discussion format or whether there were just general group dynamic issues. Combined across the categories, 6/9 students who had a concern about the LC unit were experiencing some form of group work issue. My hope was that a group conversation would help non-participating students to see that when they did not complete their part, their entire group suffered. In some cases, this was effective, but a small number of students continued to post their work late and/or not participate. By the end of the unit, I was satisfied that I had responded to student feedback and problems to the best of my ability. Luckily, even with these problems, no students reported that their group activities were going horribly. Even the 33% (9) of responses that noted specific issues all included some comment about how things were going well in general despite the issues that the student or that the group was facing.

Another interesting finding from the mid-unit survey was that many students voiced a preference for a certain type of discussion or an enjoyment of both types. Students mentioned their preferences in response to either the first or second survey question. 10 students (37%) stated that they preferred the live Zoom discussions, 5 students (19%) noted a preference for threaded discussions, and 6 students (22%) said that they enjoyed both types of discussions. 6 students (22%) did not state a preference at all in their responses. While this did indicate that more students enjoyed the live discussions, there was enough student support to continue doing the threaded discussions in order to allow introverted students to participate more fully. It was refreshing to see that so many students were enjoying and participating in the live discussions, and this does indicate that LCs create a fertile ground for authentic group discussion in an online environment even where other discussion and group activities have faltered.

In response to question 3, students also noted a variety of benefits and learning gains that they were experiencing as a result of different components of the online LC unit. Their described benefits include 1) Seeing other perspectives (44%), 2) Critical thinking and analysis (37%), 3) Communication and collaboration skills (15%), 4) Learning to ask thoughtful questions (7%), 5) Goal setting (4%), and 6) Making connections (4%). The table below includes the number of students who identified each benefit, the percentage of students who identified a benefit out of the total number of respondents (27), and representative quotes from each category. If a student mentioned multiple benefits, I coded that response multiple times. This accounts for the total number of students below equaling above 27 and the total percentages below totaling above 100%.

**Table 9***Students' Identified Benefits of Online Literature Circles at the Halfway Point*

Students' Identified Benefits	Sample Student Responses
Seeing Other Perspectives 12 Students 44%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I would say the parts that are contributing the most are the collaborative group activities, reflection activities and both the face to face discussions and threaded discussions. I don't know if it is just me but I love it when I have my group members' opinion or their side on what they thought of the parts of the story we have read. Sometimes if I'm not understanding a part, these activities help me to look at their side and get a better understanding or even look at the story differently depending on their views.”</li> <li>• “I get to learn more using different perspectives of others based on different questions given.”</li> </ul>
Critical Thinking and Analysis 10 Students 37%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I am learning how to go more in-depth within a book.”</li> <li>• “Through independent readings I am learning how to apply a (mostly) unbiased view of a book and use the structures like hero's journey and critical theory lenses to help me develop an opinion and analyze it. The mini lessons we have help me process and retain the information given at a better pace and in a way that I can actually learn from.”</li> </ul>
Communication and Collaboration Skills 4 Students 15%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I'm definitely learning how to communicate better with others by thanking them and using their name when I address them.”</li> <li>• “I'm learning to listen to others' responses to things &amp; how our opinions may differ but to still respect their opinions.”</li> </ul>
Learning to Ask Thoughtful Questions 2 Students 7%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I am learning how to ask better questions and I am learning how to work in an effective team.”</li> <li>• “I am learning how to get better with prompts for our discussions that I know will dig deep into what we read and how to apply what I am reading to multiple lenses or to the real world.”</li> </ul>
Goal Setting 1 Student 4%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “The most recent thing is that you have to continue to strive to meet your goal, without getting distracted and forgetting about your goal as a whole.”</li> </ul>
Making Connections 1 Student 4%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I am starting to make connections with real life aspects and I am starting to see new points of views.”</li> </ul>

These responses from students were encouraging to say the least. Students were able to identify how different parts of our online LC unit were contributing to their learning, and they were able to pinpoint specific skills that they were learning for the first time or that they were strengthening as a result of our class activities. Even students who had previously identified issues with group members not participating or posting late responses were able to point to specific ways that this unit was helping them to learn and grow. This indicates that despite the group work challenges, virtual LC units are still worthwhile in order to achieve the gains that students identified at the mid-way point.

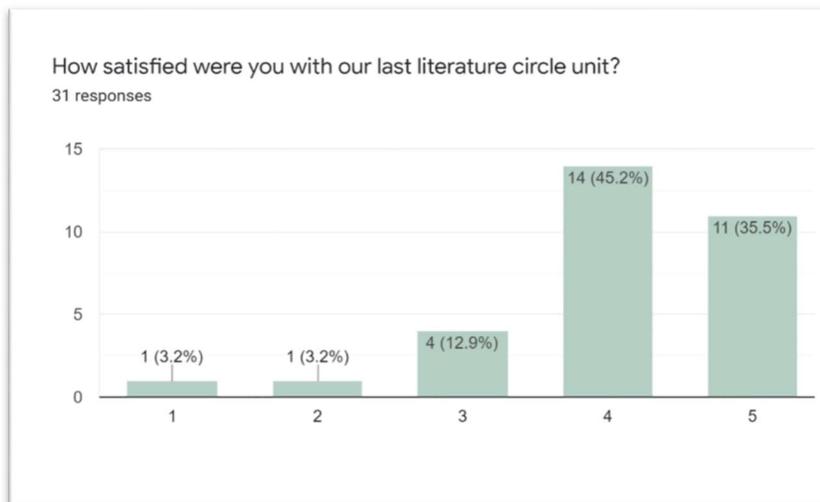
### **Post-Unit Survey Findings**

#### ***Student Satisfaction with the Unit***

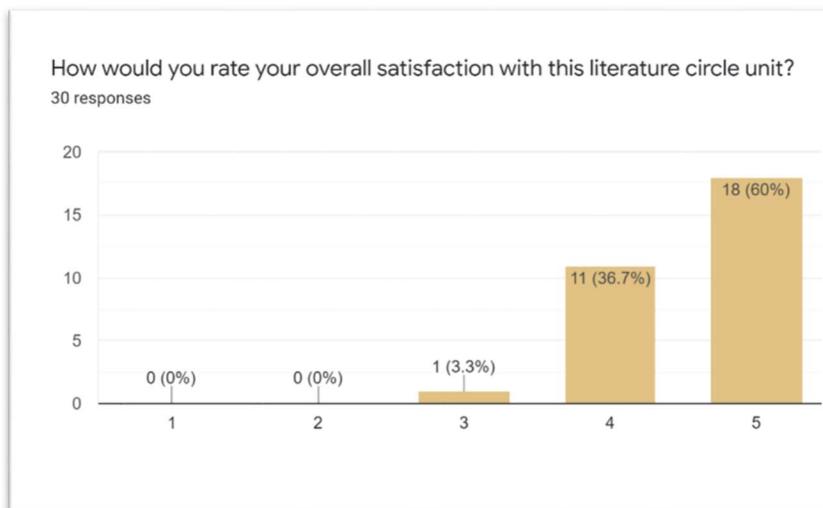
At the end of the unit, students completed a post-unit survey in order to provide feedback about their satisfaction with the unit, the benefits of the unit, and the components of the LC unit that most contributed to their learning. 1 of the participants did not complete this survey, so there are 30 total participants' responses included in this data set. Similar to the pre-unit survey, I asked students about their overall satisfaction with the unit on a scale from 1-5 with 1 being dissatisfied and 5 being fully satisfied. In order to easily compare, I have provided Figure 2 again, which was from the pre-unit survey, followed by Figure 3, which was from the post-unit survey.

**Figure 2**

*Student Satisfaction with Previous Literature Circle Unit*

**Figure 3**

*Student Satisfaction with the Current Literature Circle Unit*



Overall student satisfaction increased dramatically. Most notably, no students ranked their satisfaction below a 3, and only 1 student (3%) ranked his/her/their satisfaction at a 3 in the post-unit survey compared. There was also a sharp rise among students who ranked their satisfaction as a 5. 18 students (60%) were fully satisfied with the unit based on the post-unit survey, up from 11 students (36%) who indicated as such in the pre-unit survey.

As with the pre-unit survey, students then had a question in which they explained their number choice for the question above. I coded responses just like with the pre-unit survey: one round of coding looked at responses with a satisfaction rating of 3-5 in order to determine reasons for student satisfaction, and round two of coding examined responses with a satisfaction rating of 1-4 in order to determine reasons for dissatisfaction. Interestingly, in the first round of coding, the same categories arose as with the pre-unit survey just with different percentages: 1) Positive group interaction (50%), 2) General satisfaction (30%), 3) Deeper thinking (7%), 4) Enjoying their book (7%), and 5) Enjoying the structure (7%). Table 10 below details the number of students who listed a reason for their satisfaction, the percentage of students who listed a reason for their satisfaction, and sample student responses. Happily, all students ranked their satisfaction as a 3 or higher, so the categories below include all 30 responses in the survey.

**Table 10***Reasons for Satisfaction with the Current Literature Circle Unit*

Reasons for Student Satisfaction	Sample Student Responses
Positive Group Interaction 15 Students 50%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Overall, it was a good experience because I was able to interact with others even through this pandemic. It was also good to see the views of others in different topics but sometimes the participation would be lagging or the effort to accomplish an assignment.”</li> <li>• “I am very satisfied with this literature circle unit because it was very interactive and sparked new friendships, as well as allowed for academic conversations to take place. The Zoom lit circle meetings were the best and helped me build confidence in talking.”</li> </ul>
General Satisfaction 9 Students 30%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I rated my satisfaction a four because overall everything went well and some of it was fun. I don't have a real reason why I chose four except it wasn't a five and it wasn't anything lower than a four.”</li> <li>• “Even though this was online, we progressed on our literature circle meetings and I really enjoyed it.”</li> </ul>
Deeper Thinking 2 Students 7%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I listed 5, because, to be honest I have never read a book and finished it, but when I got to Mrs. Smith’s Class I learned how to read fast and analyze what the author is saying or feeling behind those words.”</li> <li>• “Everything went great. The book choices, the group discussions, the analytical thinking. I'm surprised with the things I can come up with, but it's thanks to this unit that I had to take this action and way of thinking.”</li> </ul>
Enjoying Their Book 2 Students 7%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I loved the book &amp; the live discussions were great because I got to hear other opinions on the book.”</li> <li>• “I really liked this unit. I thought my book was really interesting and I actually liked doing the reading logs after each discussion rather than doing it on one document and turning it in at the end because I felt like it held me accountable.”</li> </ul>
Enjoying the Structure 2 Students 7%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I enjoyed this literature circle unit the most out of all of them because of how productive it was. I was skeptical at first at the method used in this literature circle, but I liked it a lot.”</li> <li>• “Overall, the literature circles went really well. I enjoyed the mix of both threaded and live discussions, because they helped really see where everyone's headspace was at in terms of the events of the book.”</li> </ul>

Most interestingly, in comparing this chart to the chart examining students' reasons for satisfaction with the first LC unit (Table 4 on page 40) positive group interaction as a reason for satisfaction went up significantly. 6/21 students (21%) noted positive group interaction as causing their satisfaction in the first LC unit, but 15/30 students (50%) mentioned positive group interaction as a reason for their satisfaction in the unit of study. The main difference between the two units was the inclusion of live discussions in Zoom breakout groups, so it is likely that this component of the LC unit under study was the primary reason for the higher satisfaction.

As stated above, in the second round of coding, I analyzed the responses of students who ranked their satisfaction as lower than a 5 in order to determine specific reasons for their dissatisfaction. No students ranked their satisfaction as a 1 or 2, so this round of coding included the 1 student that ranked his satisfaction as a 3 and the 11 students who ranked their satisfaction as a 4. All of the percentages in the following sentences and in Table 11 are out of those 12 responses. Similar categories emerged as with the pre-unit survey, but there were a few changes. The categories are as follows: 1) Group issues (50%), 2) General satisfaction—no specified reason for the lower ranking (33%), 3) Personal problems (8%), and 4) Dissatisfaction with the book (8%). Table 11 includes the number of students in each category, the percentages of each category out of the 12 student responses, and sample student responses.

**Table 11***Reasons for Dissatisfaction with the Current Literature Circle Unit*

Reasons for Student Dissatisfaction	Sample Student Responses
Group Issues 6 Students 50%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I really liked how we got to talk to people and how we got to work together. There was some stuff I did not like. For example some of my teammates did not do what they were required to do.”</li> <li>• “I enjoyed the conversation that happened within my group, but two of my groupmates didn't do their work in a timely manner.”</li> </ul>
General Satisfaction—No Specified Reason for the Lower Ranking 4 Students 33%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I feel like everything went extremely well &amp; that it was actually nice to work with the other students.”</li> <li>• “It was nothing I have ever done before. I loved learning about my peers’ opinions when it came to our literature circle books, and I really like how our books tied into our unit.”</li> </ul>
Personal Problems 1 Student 8%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “It wasn't super hard, it was me just me not doing the work fast enough.”</li> </ul>
Dissatisfaction with the Book 1 Student 8%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “It was good, but I didn't like the book.”</li> </ul>

The most notable finding from this combined data is that 50% of all students specifically mentioned positive group interaction as the main reason for their satisfaction with this unit, but of the 12 students who expressed any dissatisfaction, 50% (6) of their reasons were due to group issues. When spread out across all of the responses, that makes 20% of participants (6/30) who noted that issues with their group members made them somewhat dissatisfied with the unit. The responses were usually about group members not participating at all or submitting late posts to the threaded discussion boards. My conclusion from this data is that group dynamics have a

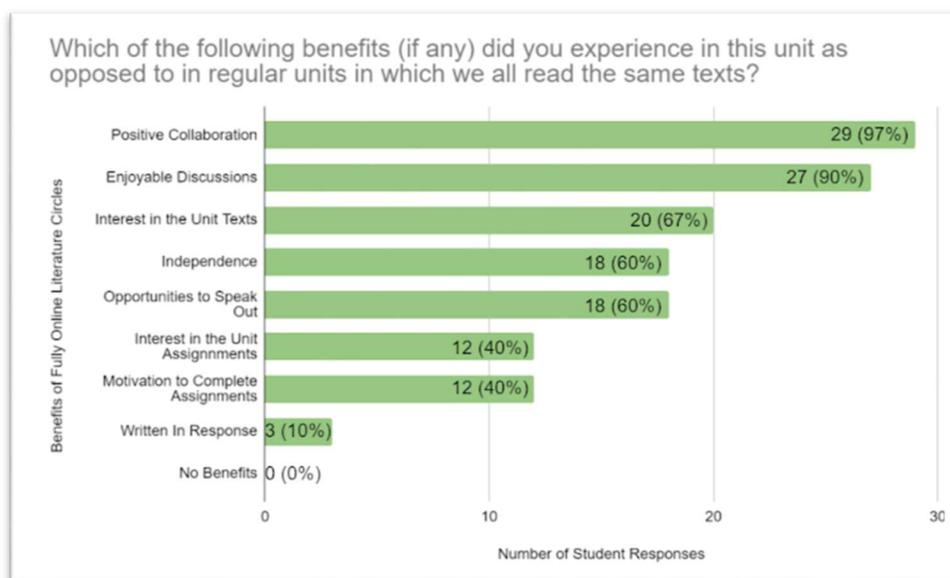
significant impact on whether or not students are highly satisfied with LC units. However, as no participants ranked their satisfaction level below a 3, even when there were group issues causing some dissatisfaction among students, it was not enough to make them entirely unsatisfied with the unit.

### *The Benefits of Online Literature Circle Units*

The next question on the post-unit survey asked students which benefits they experienced in this unit in comparison to other units in which all students read the same text. Figure 4 charts out students' responses to that question, which included provided benefits for students to choose from as well as an area for students to write in benefits that were not included in the list.

**Figure 4**

*Student Perceptions of the Benefits of Online Literature Circles Compared to Traditional Units*



Even more than students' written responses explaining their satisfaction ranking, this chart clearly demonstrates that positive peer collaboration is a benefit of fully online LCs: 29/30 (97%) students selected this as a benefit and 27/30 (90%) students also listed enjoyable discussions as a benefit. This indicates that most students who mentioned group work problems

with a particular member still experienced positive collaboration and enjoyable discussions with other group members.

Other notable findings from this chart are that only 12/30 (40%) students said that they experienced a higher interest in the assignments or a higher motivation to complete assignments in this unit as compared to traditional units in which all students read the same text and work more independently. This supports one of my earlier observations that some students were still lacking in participation and abounding in late assignments despite having group members who were depending on them. Our online LC unit did not drastically increase students' intrinsic motivation to complete assignments, but the reasons for this are unclear due to the context of Covid-19.

Most notably, none of the students selected "No benefits" in this survey question. All students identified benefits to participating in fully online LCs, even despite the issues that students brought up in their mid-unit interviews and post-unit survey responses. This is an encouraging finding, to be sure.

Finally, students had the opportunity to write about their own benefits if they identified positive outcomes from the unit that were not listed in the survey question. Three students chose to write in their own answers, and I have included their responses below.

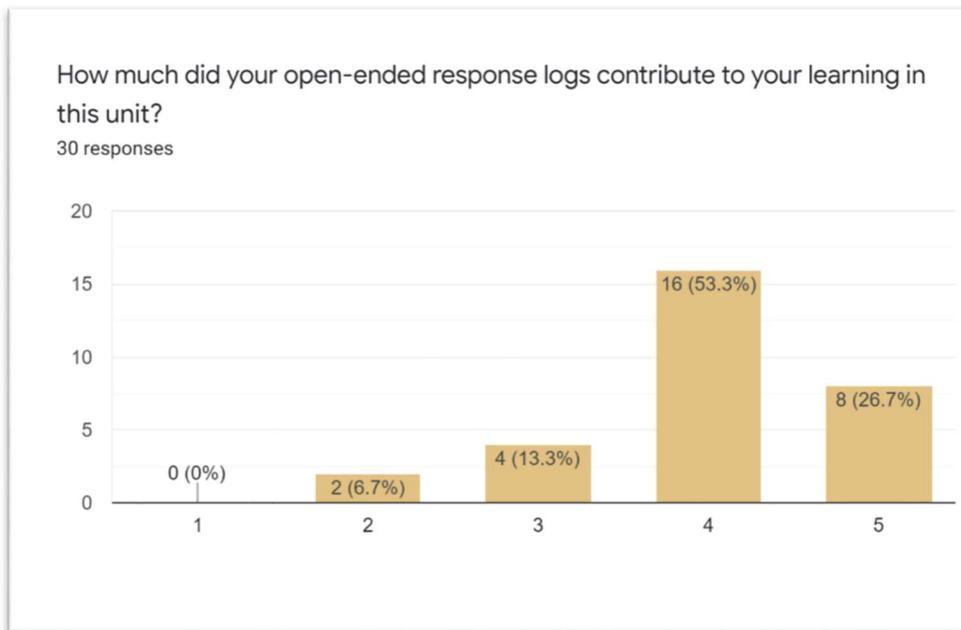
1. "As well I benefited that you took some of your free time, to send the people their late work and reached out to them when they had a hard time. You really care about your job. Based on how you work, talk and how you get ready and be excited every morning and greet each student."
2. "Multiple POV of understandings to help deepen my analysis for an assignment."
3. "Confidence booster 10/10"

Overall, the chart above in combination with students' written-in responses and my observations about their live and threaded discussions demonstrate that there are a variety of benefits to conducting fully online LCs. The biggest benefits are positive collaboration and enjoyable discussions, which a majority of participants selected. More than half of students also identified independence, opportunities to speak out, and interest in the unit texts as benefits, and just under half of participants noted that motivation and interest in the unit assignments were benefits as well. Furthermore, in their written-in responses to the survey question charted above as well as in their mid-unit interviews, students identified the following benefits: higher confidence, multiple perspectives, deeper understanding, deeper critical thinking, deeper understanding, appreciation for the unit structure, and enhanced communication and collaboration skills. Students also noted that they were learning to ask thoughtful questions, set goals, and make real world connections. Finally, in my analysis of students' threaded and live discussions, I observed students exhibiting a variety of academic discussion skills and in-depth analysis. Overall, there were many identifiable benefits to teaching fully online LCs that both students and I could easily recognize.

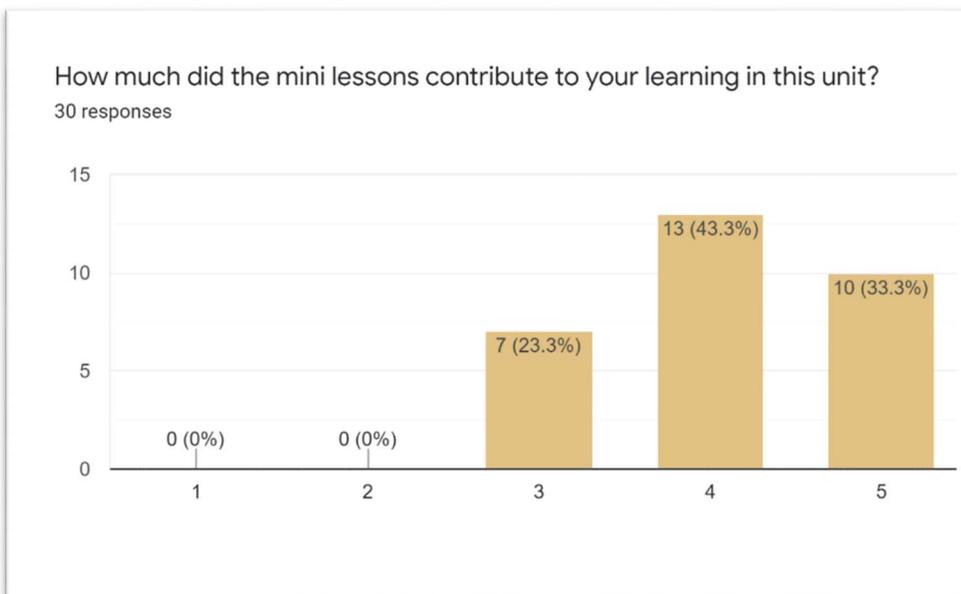
The next set of questions in the post-unit survey asked students to identify how much different components of our LC unit contributed to students' learning on a 1-5 scale where 1 meant that the component in question contributed minimally to their learning and 5 meant that it contributed significantly to their learning. Figures 5-12 chart out the students' responses and perspectives of what most contributed to their learning in this unit.

**Figure 5**

*The Impact of Open-Ended Response Logs on Student Learning*

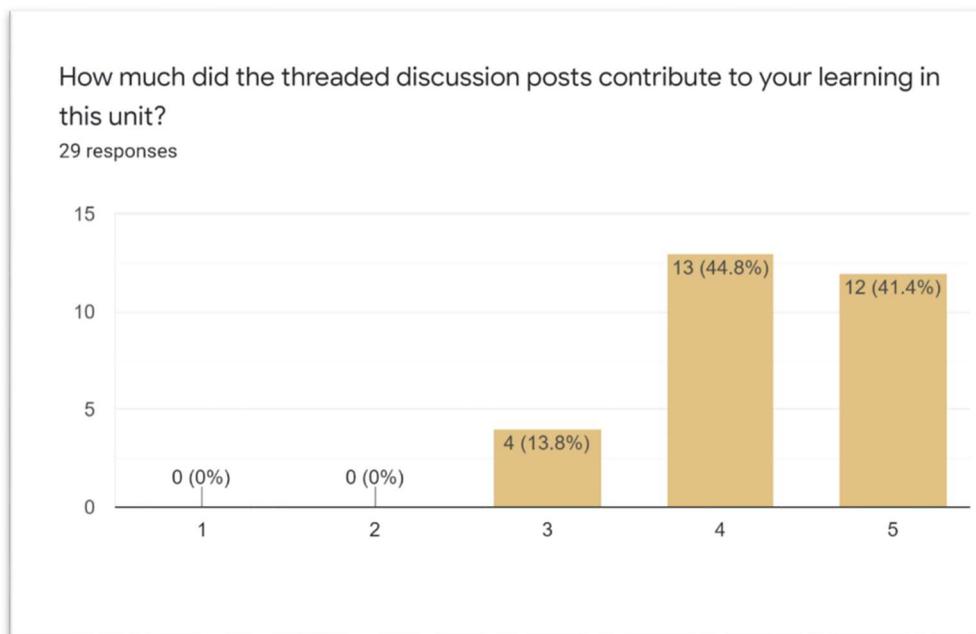
**Figure 6**

*The Impact of Mini Lessons on Student Learning*

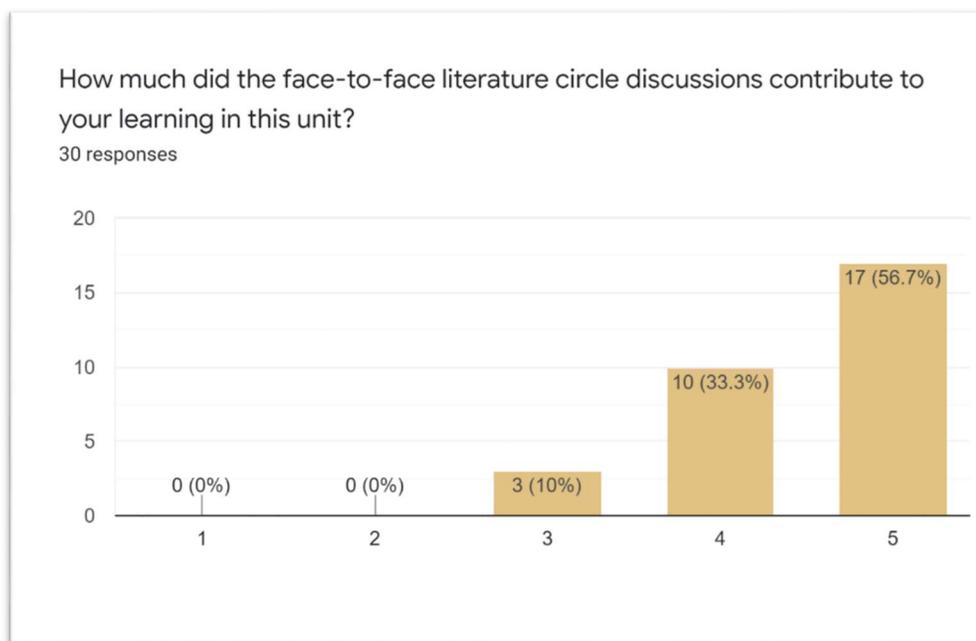


**Figure 7**

*The Impact of Threaded Discussion Posts on Student Learning*

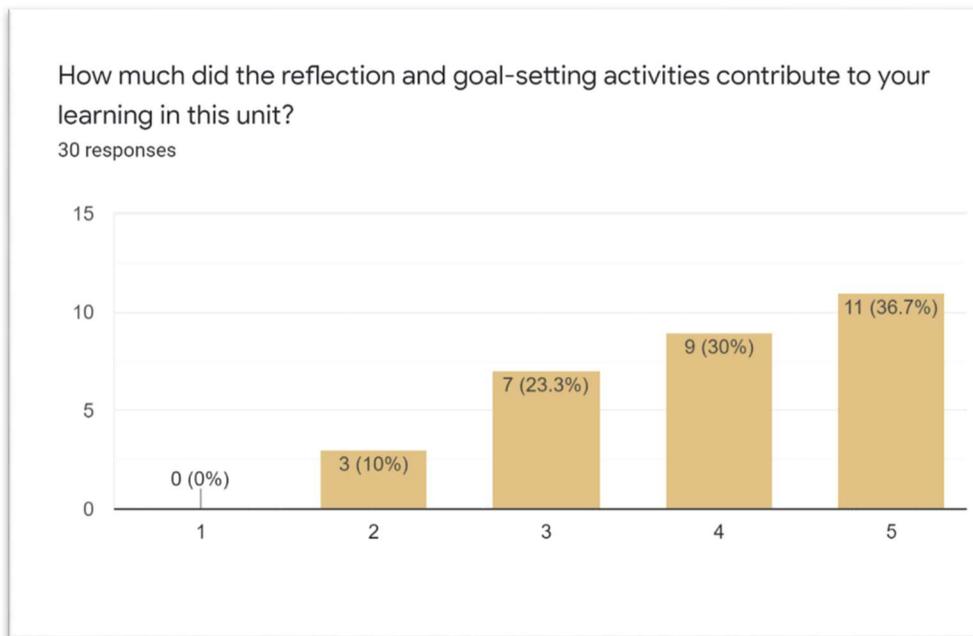
**Figure 8**

*The Impact of Face-to-Face Literature Circle Discussions on Student Learning*

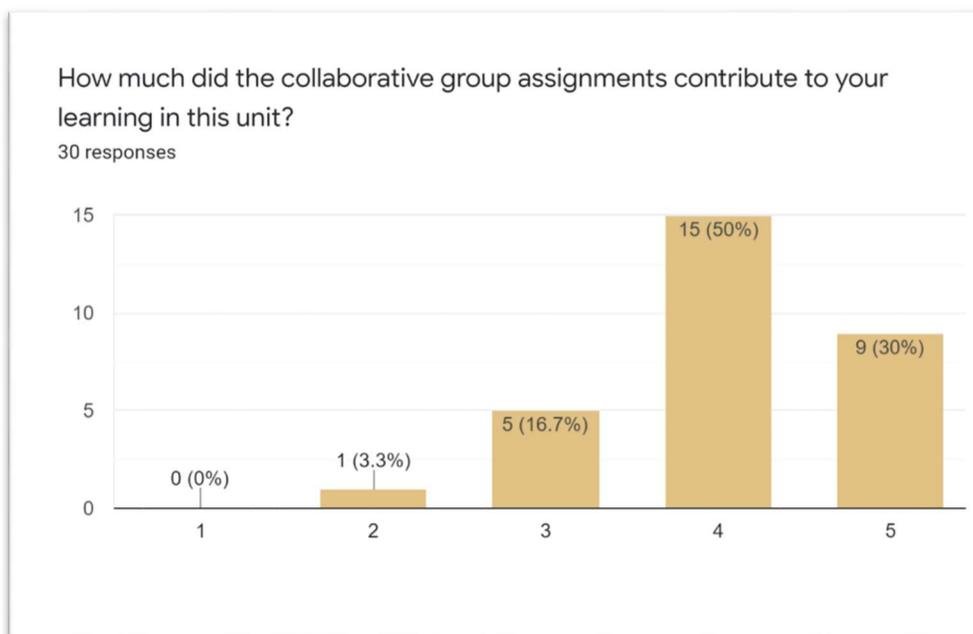


**Figure 9**

*The Impact of Reflection and Goal-Setting Activities on Student Learning*

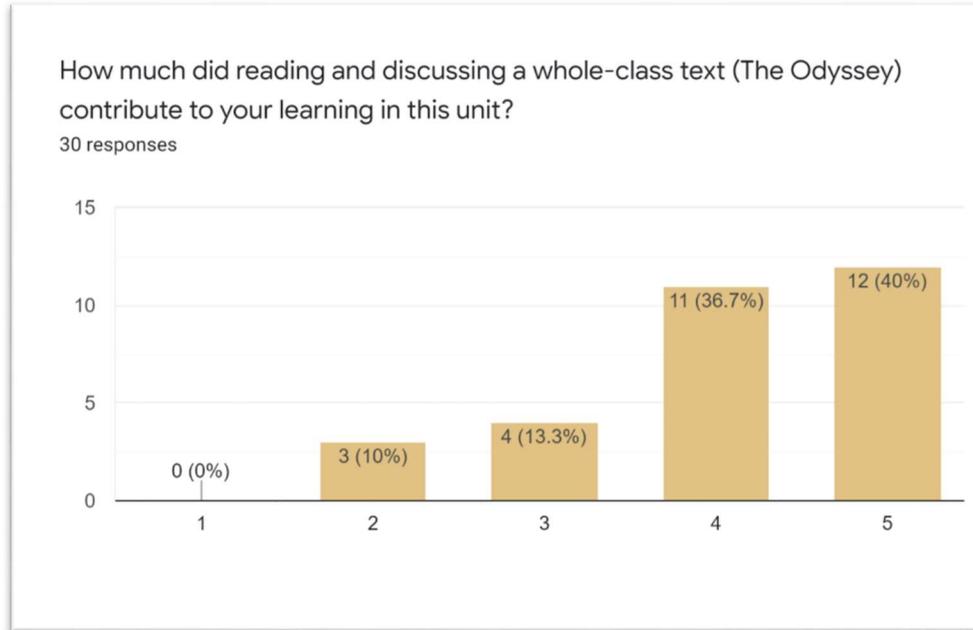
**Figure 10**

*The Impact of Collaborative Group Assignments on Student Learning*

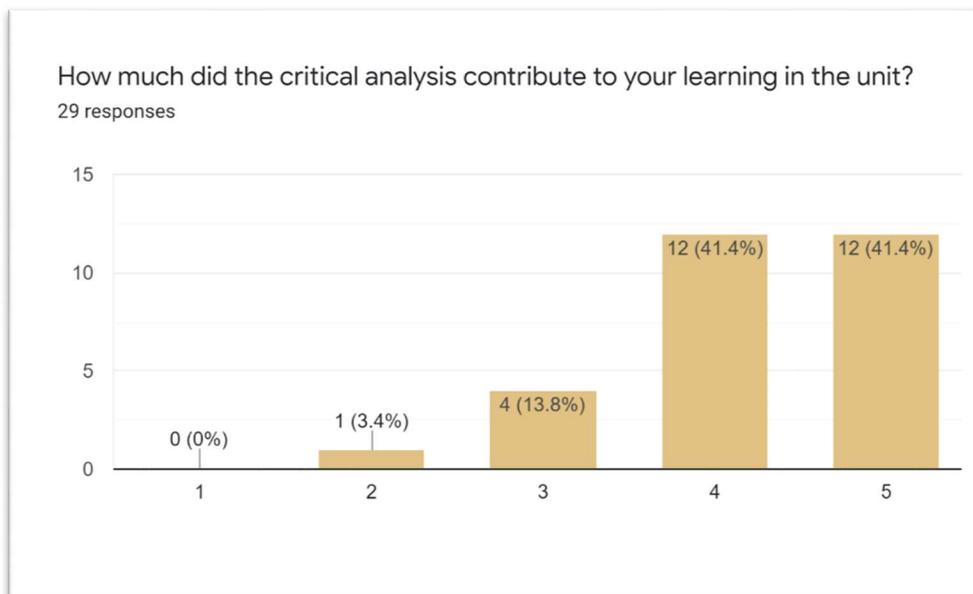


**Figure 11**

*The Impact of Reading and Discussing a Whole-Class Text on Student Learning*

**Figure 12**

*The Impact of the Critical Analysis on Student Learning*



For every component of the unit, at least  $\frac{2}{3}$  of participants (20) ranked the level of contribution to their learning as a 4 or 5. Additionally, when students ranked how much the mini lessons, the threaded discussion boards, and the face-to-face discussions contributed to their learning, no students ranked these components as less than a 3 on the Likert scale. From the students' perspectives, these were clearly the parts of the unit that most affected their learning.

Furthermore, there was only one component where a majority of students selected "5" for how much this part of the unit impacted their learning. 17 students (56.7%) felt that the face-to-face Zoom Discussions highly contributed to their learning throughout the unit. This result was surprising considering how much I struggled to get students to collaborate and discuss in their breakout groups throughout the rest of the semester, as well as the number of students who demonstrated apprehension about spending such a long time (20 minutes) with group members in their breakout groups. However, this data demonstrates that the majority of my student participants felt that their participation in the Zoom discussions had a large impact on their learning despite my concerns. This indicates that if teachers are struggling with getting students to collaborate and discuss in Zoom or Google Meet, setting up LCs might be a great solution.

While no students ranked any of the unit components as a "1" for minimally contributing to their learning, students ranked several components as a "2" on the impact to learning scale. 10% of students (3) selected "2" for how much reading and discussing a whole-class text and the reflection and goal-setting activities impacted their learning. 7% of students (2) selected "2" for how much the open-ended response logs contributed to their learning. Finally, 3% of students (1) selected "2" for how much the critical analysis and collaborative group assignments helped them to learn. With such a small group of student participants, those numbers are not insignificant, and

I will need to conduct further research and seek out additional student feedback in order to improve those LC components in future units.

Despite these areas for further improvement and reflection on my part, the low number of students who selected “2” for any of the components of the fully online LC unit indicates that my structure for online LCs was highly effective. For every component of the unit, at least  $\frac{2}{3}$  of participants (20) ranked the level of contribution to their learning as a 4 or a 5. Feedback from my students as well as my own observations demonstrate that this is a good framework for fully online LCs that can certainly be adjusted for a variety of contexts as well as improved upon for better student engagement and learning. However, in making adjustments, teachers should be sure to include face-to-face discussions, threaded discussion boards, and mini lessons because these were the components that students felt most contributed to their learning.

## CHAPTER 5

### Discussion

Through careful analysis of survey data and student responses in live Zoom discussions as well as threaded discussion boards, I was able to identify four major themes—positive collaboration, multiple perspectives, the importance of the hybrid structure, and group dynamics. These themes provide an understanding of the benefits and challenges of online LCs as well as the components that most contribute to student learning.

#### Positive Collaboration

Positive collaboration stood out as a benefit of online LCs in every data source from the unit. At the mid-way point in the unit, 44% of participants (12) noted that discussing with their group members was an enjoyable experience that was contributing to their learning, and 15% (4) noticed that their communication skills were improving over the course of the unit. In the post-unit survey, 50% of students (15) pointed to positive group interaction as the primary reason for their satisfaction with the unit, with one student even writing the following response: “I felt that everything fell into place how it was supposed to leaving me with no problems. I loved my teammates and feel that we worked together very well to get everything done as a group.” Later in the survey, 97% of students (29) identified positive collaboration as a benefit of online LCs, and 90% (27) noted that enjoyable discussions were a benefit. In my observations and analysis of students’ discussions, I observed that students were having thoughtful and in-depth conversations in both the threaded and live discussions, and the thematic coding of the discussion data revealed that students were using a variety of discussion skills to foster an environment for positive collaboration. In both arenas for discussion, students frequently built upon their peers’ responses, which demonstrated active listening in the live discussions and careful reading of peers’

responses in the threaded discussions. Students also referred to group members by name in both conversation structures, which is a discussion strategy that makes everyone feel like part of the group. There were also discussion skills that lent themselves to one type of discussion over the other. Students facilitated the conversation by inviting other group members to speak in the live discussion, especially when a student had not had a turn to speak about a topic yet or when a student had been silent for a few minutes. In the threaded discussions, students created a positive environment for discussion by thanking group members for their posts and acknowledging especially thoughtful posts.

In Whittingham's (2013) study on fully online LCs for his college education courses, he found that using this strategy created a positive class community and resulted in better collaboration among his students. I certainly found that to be true in my study. This unit was a joy to teach for a variety of reasons, but the number one reason was getting to see students work together, experience joy, and forge lasting friendships even in the midst of a global pandemic.

### **Multiple Perspectives**

Throughout students' survey responses, they repeatedly noted that discussing with their peers and hearing multiple perspectives and interpretations was helping them to think critically about their books. In the mid-unit survey, 44% of students (12) observed that hearing the perspectives of group members was contributing to their learning. One student explained her thoughts in-depth regarding why she valued hearing her group members' interpretations:

I don't know if it is just me but I love it when I have my group member's opinion or their side on what they thought of the parts of the story we have read. Sometimes if I'm not understanding a part these activities help me to look at their side and get a better understanding or even look at the story differently depending on their views.

Later in the unit when students were completing the post-unit survey question about benefits derived from the online LC unit, one student wrote in, “Multiple POV of understandings to help deepen my analysis for an assignment.” It was a lack of foresight on my part to not include multiple perspectives as a benefit for students to choose from in that “select all that apply” question, but it was notable that one of the three written in benefits was on the importance of multiple perspectives not only for the sake of interesting conversation but for the purpose of deeper analysis. The students’ observations about the importance of talking together in order to help each other learn is an example of Vygotsky’s (1978) social development theory as well as CL in action.

From my observations of students’ live and threaded discussions and the analysis of those transcripts, I can confirm that thoughtful discussion and analysis were occurring in both realms of discussion. However, in the threaded discussions boards, there were instances of students disagreeing respectfully with one another, which introduces multiple perspectives as opposed to simply agreeing with what other students have said. Students also noted how a group member’s post caused a change in perspective in the threaded discussions, which indicates a value of multiple perspectives as well as a deepening understanding of the shared text. Those discussion skills were not observed in the Zoom breakout group conversations. While students observed the importance of experiencing multiple perspectives in both live and threaded discussions, my data analysis indicates that the threaded discussions boards were where students demonstrated the discussion skills that resulted in diverse perspectives and lead to deeper analysis and understanding.

## The Importance of the Hybrid Structure

Threaded discussions and live discussions, be they face-to-face or in a Zoom breakout group, are inherently different—they require different sets of skills, elicit different kinds of responses from students, and give students practice with different kinds of literacies (Beeghly, 2005; Grisham and Wolsey, 2006; Larson, 2008; Larson, 2009; Larson & Kaiper, 2002; Scharber, 2009). I found this to be true in my own study, and I believe that a hybrid structure with both live and threaded discussions is the best way to ensure that students learn how to have academic conversations in a variety of contexts as well as for teachers to truly assess students' understanding and skills.

In the mid-unit survey, students expressed a mix of preferences for one type of discussion or another. 10 students (37%) stated that they preferred the live Zoom discussions, 5 students (19%) noted a preference for threaded discussions, and 6 students (22%) said that they enjoyed both types of discussions. 6 students (22%) did not state a preference at all in their responses. The highest percentage of students preferred the live Zoom discussions, and later in the post-unit survey, 57% of students ranked the face-to-face literature discussions as highly contributing to their learning. This was the only component of the LC unit where a majority of students ranked it as a 5/5. It is clear that the students preferred the live discussions, which was truly surprising for me as a teacher. In other breakout group activities throughout the semester, I lamented at how students would prefer to divide and conquer a task and then sit in a Zoom breakout room in silence rather than have a meaningful conversation with their peers. When I told students that in this last unit, they would be required to have 20-minute discussions in their breakout groups, many students expressed apprehension, but it turned out to be the part of the unit that they valued most. In looking back at the previous breakout group activities that students were reluctant to

participate in and comparing them to our LC breakout groups, there were a few main differences. First, students chose the texts themselves. Second, students chose the discussion topics. Third, students established norms and expectations for their conversations within their small groups. Fourth, there was no other task to accomplish except to keep the text-focused conversation going. These ingredients created fertile ground for collaboration and discussion that I had not witnessed all semester, and students made similar observations:

I am very satisfied with this literature circle unit because it was very interactive and sparked new friendships, as well as allowed for academic conversations to take place.

The Zoom lit circle meetings were the best and helped me build confidence in talking. Especially in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, the face-to-face discussions were vital in helping students make meaningful connections with their peers and in building their confidence with academic discussion.

The threaded discussions, while less favored by the students, were important because of the different kinds of questions and responses that students posted there that they did not include in their live discussions. There were 10 new question categories and 4 new response categories in the threaded discussion data, thus demonstrating that the threaded discussions produced a larger variety of posts from students. Furthermore, the new categories were text-focused and demonstrated mastery of analytical skills, such as asking about symbolism, author's purpose, or text structure. Therefore, based on my goals for the unit and the analysis and discussion skills that I wanted students to work on, the threaded discussions were important in regards to student growth. This supports Beeghly's (2005) and Larson's (2009) findings about discussion board conversations among students being more thoughtful and in-depth than face-to-face discussions. In addition, as Vonderwell et al. (2007) found, the threaded discussion boards create transcripts

of the discussion that teachers can use to assess students' understanding and their mastery of learning objectives and that students can use to reflect on their progress and set goals for future discussion. I found this to be true, and this same type of assessment and reflection is more difficult with face-to-face discussion.

Based on my own findings as well as best practices from sources in the literature review, I recommend that teachers wanting to use LCs in a fully online teaching context use a similar hybrid structure in order to meet the needs of all students and to capitalize on the benefits of both types of discussion. Even once my school returns to in-person learning for all students, I will continue to implement a hybrid structure due to the increased depth and variety of students' posts in threaded discussion boards as well as the assessment and reflection opportunities that discussion boards provide.

### **Group Dynamics**

As with all things in life, the LC unit was not perfect. In the live discussions, there were instances of students speaking aloud who were ignoring a lone student posting in the chat, and among groups who chose to use only the chat feature, the rate of discussion was painfully slow. In the threaded discussions, there were 25 occurrences of late posts and 32 instances of missing posts. In students' survey responses, they responded honestly about the group issues that they were having. In the mid-unit survey, 9 students (33%) cited issues that they were having in the unit, and of those 9 students' concerns, 6 had to do with group members not participating fully or being difficult to work with. However, even when students were experiencing group work issues, they were still able to discuss what they were learning and to determine which parts of the unit were contributing most to their learning. Later in the post-unit survey, students were asked to rank their satisfaction with the unit and explain their number choice. There were 12 students who

expressed some form of dissatisfaction with the unit, and 6 of those students cited group work issues as the cause of their dissatisfaction. When spread out across all of the responses, 20% of participants in the post-unit survey (6/30) experienced group work issues that affected their satisfaction with the unit. However, no students ranked their satisfaction as below a 3 on a 1-5 scale, and all students were able to identify benefits to the LC unit later in the survey.

My conclusion from these data sources is that where group work issues occurred, they were enough of a problem to slightly decrease student satisfaction with the unit. However, the group work issues were not problematic enough to result in complete dissatisfaction with the unit or to impact students' abilities to learn and benefit from the unit. In my five years of implementing LC units, there have always been a small number of issues, be they arguments between group members, group members not being prepared, or other minor troublesome scenarios. These issues are unavoidable because students are human beings, and human beings are imperfect. However, fear of having to deal with group issues should not turn teachers away who are interested in trying out online LCs. Problems will arise, and those problems will surely annoy the other group members, but the students will still benefit and learn from the experience.

### **Areas for Further Study**

CL has been shown to help students develop intrinsic motivation to submit assignments and perform well in school (Johnson et al, 1986; Slavin, 1980) as have LCs with online components (Carico, Logan, & Labbo, 2004; Day & Kroon, 2010; Edmondson, 2012; Larson, 2008; Moreillon, 2009). However, I did not notice a significant increase in intrinsic motivation due to the implementation of our online LC unit. Most of my students are highly motivated—they turned in all of their assignments and participated in all activities earlier in the semester, and they continued to do so in this unit. A handful of students wanted to learn but struggled with time

management and turning in their assignments, and this pattern continued in the LC unit. A very small number of students did not participate all semester, and they did not participate in the LC unit either. However, the context of this study in the Covid-19 pandemic makes it impossible to draw any firm conclusions from this. All of my students were learning online in order to protect them, their families, and their teachers—the students did not choose online learning of their own free will. Most of my students who struggled throughout the semester and in this unit expressed how hard it was doing everything online and how disappointed they were in their grades because they were very diligent students when everything else was normal. Even beyond online learning not being the best situation for everyone, I knew students who were having to babysit siblings while doing their work, students who were trying to learn in very hectic households, students whose parents had lost their jobs, and students who either contracted Covid-19 themselves or had close family members who were sick over the course of the semester. These conditions made it impossible to draw firm conclusions about students' intrinsic motivation in the unit. Further research must be done in order to determine whether online LCs have the same effect of inducing intrinsic motivation as CL and LCs with online components in contexts where students have chosen to participate in online learning.

There were also some findings in my study where I came to a conclusion about what happened but not why it happened. There was more variety in students' threaded discussion posts than in their contributions in the live LC conversations, but it is unclear why that was the case. I hypothesize that the slower pace of threaded discussions gave students the time that they needed in order to try out different question and response types that they were not as comfortable with in the fast-paced live discussions. However, only further research will tell. Another finding was that students disagreed respectfully with each other in the threaded discussions, but they did

not disagree with each other at all in the live discussions. It will require further research in order to determine whether this was an isolated incident or whether the format of discussion impacts how willing students are to disagree with one another. Also, if threaded discussions are places where students feel comfortable respectfully disagreeing, there would need to be research on why that is the case.

It is also important to note that I teach at an early college high school where all classes are taught at the honors level and where a majority of the students are Hispanic or African American. Typically, students are highly motivated to succeed and/or they have parents who encouraged them to attend the school. Therefore, the particular context of my school might have contributed to the overall success of the unit and the learning gains that students' experienced in the unit. In order to flesh out the research on fully online LCs in the high school classroom, there must be action research studies done in a variety of contexts. Additionally, while LCs are primarily used in English classes, there have been successful action research studies of traditional LCs in history classes (McCall, 2010; Tirado, 2016), science classes (Calmer & Straits, 2014; Miller et al., 2007; Wilfong, 2011), and even math classes (Gerretson & Cruz, 2011; Jett, 2018). These different disciplines should also be considered for studying the benefits of online LCs as well as the strategies that work best in the context of those classes.

Finally, the context of Covid-19 heavily impacted my action research study and my students in a variety of ways. In order to expand the research on fully online LCs, there will need to be more research conducted in online learning contexts in which students have opted for that style of learning and where Covid-19 is not a factor.

## Conclusion

As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, teachers in my district had to quickly adjust to online teaching and determine how to best teach our students in this new environment. This action research study explored the implementation of online LCs in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, but the findings have implications that extend beyond the current context. Online learning was on the rise before the pandemic hit, and it will continue to be an important part of education in the future. For teachers in fully online contexts, this study provides a framework for how to successfully implement and structure a LC unit. It also explores the benefits and challenges that such a unit will entail. For in-person teachers, this study adds to the previous work on LCs with online components as well as the research on threaded discussions by demonstrating the effectiveness of hybrid LC structures. For education researchers, this study adds to the literature on CL, LCs, and threaded discussions and provides areas for further study.

An unseen benefit of the Covid-19 pandemic is that it provided unique opportunities for studies such as this one, and through my action research experience, I became familiar with technologies like Canvas and Zoom that I never would have used before. I am a better teacher because of this experience, and I have learned valuable lessons about how to implement online LCs as well as strategic improvements that I will make to my LC units once I am back with my students in our brick-and-mortar classroom. Further, I hope to share my experience with other teachers in the hope that they too might learn and benefit from my actions.

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**APPENDICES**

## Appendix A

### Parental Consent

#### **What are some general things you should know about research studies?**

Your child is invited to take part in a research study. Your child's participation in this study is voluntary and not a requirement of their course activities. Your child has the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate, and to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of this research study is to gain a better understanding of fully online literature circles. We will do this through analyzing information from your student's coursework that they complete in an online literature circle unit in their English I class at J.D. Clement Early College High School. As a normal part of the course all students will participate in the regular course work (which includes discussion post assignments, breakout room discussions, group assignments, a post-unit assessment, pre- and post-unit surveys, and informal interviews).

If you grant permission for your child to be in the research study, it simply allows me to use their academic information as data in the research study. You may not want to allow your student's information to be used as data because you prefer for your child's work to be used solely for his/her/their academic purposes. You may want to allow your student's data to be used for research purposes because of the contributions that this study could have in the field of education, particularly with fully online teaching and learning.

Specific details about the research in which your child is invited to participate are contained below. If you do not understand something in this form, please ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If, at any time, you have questions about your child's participation in this research, do not hesitate to contact Mrs. Smith or the NC State IRB office.

#### **Parent/Guardian Letter from Mrs. Smith**

Dear Parent/Guardian,

This year I am completing a graduate program through North Carolina State University in order to earn a Master's degree in New Literacies and Global Learning. An integral part of my work this year is the completion of an action research project for my thesis. Action research is a method of examining one's own actions and investigating how those actions can influence others to learn. I have chosen to study the benefits of online literature circles as well as which aspects of online literature circles most contribute to student learning. I would be very thankful if you would grant your permission for your child to take part in this research by allowing me to access their course information and activities for research purposes. Your child will not be asked to do anything outside of their normal course activities. Permission from you will allow me to include your student's academic information as data in this research.

As a normal part of our course activities, your child will complete their normal coursework and evaluation activities including being observed, completing surveys, and participating in interviews. These activities improve the course as it progresses and will be used the following year. For this research project, allowing me to use your child's academic information, including

coursework (discussion board posts, breakout room discussions, group assignments, and the post-unit assessment) and demographic information, will constitute participation in research. Your student's work and responses will be analyzed as part of the study, but students' grades will not be included in the action research study.

All of my current students will be invited to take part in the study. In order to be a participant in this study, your child must have your permission to participate, and your child must agree to be in the study. Your child cannot participate in this study if they do not want to be in the study or if you do not give them permission to be in the study.

The name of the school, my colleagues, and information about your child will not be made public. Student names will be replaced by pseudonyms in the raw data that is analyzed, and no identifiable information will be reported about your child. I will keep a master list of students' names and their pseudonyms, but I will be the only one to access that document. Because I am your student's teacher, I will know which work came from which students. However, at no point will it be possible for anyone else to re-identify a student from the raw data or from my finished thesis.

I will not access the consent forms until after the quarter is over and grades have been submitted. This means I will not know who had permission to be in the study until after grades are submitted. Your choice to allow your student to be in the study will not affect their rights or welfare and will have no influence over their grades or relationship with their teacher. I will not access student information for research purposes until the Fall 2020 semester is complete. I will stop using these records as data at the end of the Spring 2021 semester. Your child's information, even with identifiers removed, will not be stored or distributed for future research studies.

There are minimal risks associated with allowing your child's information to be used as data for research. All data from students will be stored on my password-protected computer and kept in my locked office when not in use.

There are no direct benefits to you or your child for allowing use of their academic information as research data. There is no compensation for participation in this research. If you choose not to have your student participate, rest assured that they will still receive the same instruction as other students. In addition, if you would like to withdraw your student from the study at any time, I will remove your students' work, surveys, and interview responses from the data, and this will not negatively impact your student in any way.

If you would like to withdraw your student from this research after giving permission, simply email me at [Katherine\\_Mitchellsm@dpsnc.net](mailto:Katherine_Mitchellsm@dpsnc.net). I will be compiling the data and writing the thesis in the Spring of 2021, so you may withdraw your student any time during the 2020-2021 school year. If you wish to be kept informed about the progress of this action research project. I can keep you updated. I will be happy to present my work to parents if there is interest.

Because I am conducting this research as part of my NC State graduate degree, this project has been reviewed and approved by NC State Institutional Review Board (IRB). If you feel that your child has not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, you may contact the NC

State IRB. An IRB office helps participants if they have any issues regarding research activities. You can contact the NC State IRB Office via e-mail at [irb-director@ncsu.edu](mailto:irb-director@ncsu.edu) or via phone at (919) 515-8754.

Please type your name and submit the permission slip below at your earliest convenience indicating if you grant your student permission to participate.

Sincerely,

Katherine Smith  
English I Honors Teacher  
J.D. Clement Early College High School

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Permission Slip

I, \_\_\_\_\_, as parent/guardian of \_\_\_\_\_, grant permission for my child to participate in the action research project. I understand that the written materials and records may be shared with the supervising professor(s) for educational purposes. I understand my child's real name will not be shared.

-OR-

I, \_\_\_\_\_, as parent/guardian of \_\_\_\_\_, would not like for my child to be included as a part of the action research project.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B

### Student Assent

Title of Study	Distance Learning Literature Circles: An Action Research Study on Literature Circles in the Time of Covid-19
Principal Investigator	Katherine Mitchell Smith
Funding Source	None
Faculty Point of Contact	Dr. Carl Young cayoung2@ncsu.edu

I am inviting you to participate in a research study about fully online literature circles.

Your parent(s)/guardian(s) know I am talking with you about the study. This form will tell you about the study to help you decide whether or not you want to participate in this research.

#### **What is the purpose of this study?**

The purpose of this research is to figure out the benefits of online literature circles as well as which aspects of online literature circles most contribute to student learning. This research is about figuring out which strategies work best for you.

#### **What will I do in this study?**

As a normal part of your class activities, you will be participating in interviews, surveys, observations, threaded discussion boards, synchronous Zoom discussions, mini lessons, pre-reading activities, and group activities as a normal part of course evaluation. I would like your permission to use the information from these activities as well as your coursework and grades for research purposes. Though you do have to complete these activities for class, you do not have to allow me to use the information as data for research.

#### **Can I participate in this study?**

You are invited to participate in this study if you agree to be in this study, your parent(s) or guardian(s) allows you to participate in this study, and you are enrolled in one of my (Mrs. Smith's) English 1 courses.

You cannot participate in this study if you do not want to participate in this study and/or your parent or guardian does not want you to participate in this study.

#### **What benefits do I get for participating in this study?**

Taking part in this study does not have direct benefits for you, but it will help me learn how to better plan literature circle units in the future, and it will help me evaluate the impact of our literature circle unit.

**Can anything happen if I am in this study?**

There are minimal foreseeable risks

**Will anyone know what I said or did in this study?**

If you decide to participate in the study, I will not tell anyone else how you respond or act as a part of this study. This means that no one outside of myself will know that it is you. Even if your parents or teachers ask, I will not tell them about what you say or do in the study. Everything will remain private and confidential. In the rare and unusual circumstance that I think you are being hurt by someone else or in danger, I am required by law to tell someone only enough information to help you be safe.

**Will you share what you learn about/from me with other people?**

I plan to share information that I learn from you with others by writing a thesis. A thesis is essentially a long essay. In my essay I will include information on what online literature circle strategies work best, what you tell me about your experiences, and the overall impact of our unit. I will not include any names or specific data that can be traced back to you in my written report.

**Do I have to be in the study?**

No, you do not. The choice is yours. No one will get angry or upset if you do not want to do this. You will not lose out on anything if you do not want to do this. You can also change your mind at any time if you decide you do not want to be in the study anymore. You do have to complete all of the assignments, interviews, and surveys for class, but you do not have to allow me to use that information (along with your grades) as data for research.

**What if I have questions?**

If you have questions about the study, you can ask me now or anytime during the study. You can also call me at (919) 421-1889 or email me at Katherine\_Mitchellsm@dpsnc.net. You can also contact my advisor, Dr. Carl Young at cayoung2@ncsu.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research or if you feel you have been hurt by this research, you can contact the IRB Office at irb-director@ncsu.edu or (919) 515-8754. You will receive a copy of this form for your records.

Printing/typing your name below means that you have read this form or have had it read to you and that you want to be in this study.

Yes, I want to be in this study

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Today's Date \_\_\_\_\_

No, I do not want to be in this study.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Today's Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C

### Pre-Unit Survey

This short survey is meant to provide me with feedback in order to improve our second literature circle unit. Your answers are not anonymous, but no other students will read your responses.

1. Do you prefer it when we read texts as a class or when you read texts in groups based on your choices?

- a. Whole-class texts

- b. Small group texts

2. Please explain your choice for the question above.

3. How satisfied were you with our last literature circle unit?

1

2

3

4

5

4. Please explain your number choice for the question above.

5. Before we start the next literature circle unit, is there anything that I can adjust or change in order to improve the experience and/or help you learn?

## Appendix D

### Mid-Unit Survey

Please respond to the questions below to give me an idea of how things are going from your perspective. Your answers are not anonymous, but no other students will read your responses.

Thank you in advance for your feedback.

1. How is everything going in your literature circle group? In your answer, you can consider the threaded discussions, the face-to-face discussions, group assignments during class, or anything else related to your group activities.
2. Which part(s) of the literature circle unit is contributing most to your learning (independent reading, threaded group discussions, face-to-face discussions, mini lessons, reflection activities, collaborative group work activities, independent work with *The Odyssey*, etc.)?
3. Based on what you spoke about in your last response, what are you learning as a result of that aspect of the literature circle unit?
4. Are there any adjustments that I can make to either improve the experience or to help you learn?





## Appendix F

### Group Literature Circle Document

#### Hero's Journey Literature Circles

##### Instructions for Setting Up your Document

1. The chosen document opener should open this document and create a new copy. Do that by clicking "File" and then "Create a copy."
2. Once you have done that, share your copy of the document with all group members and with Mrs. Smith. Be sure to set it so that all group members and Mrs. Smith can edit the document.
3. All group members should write their names in the box below.
4. Change the title of your document so that it matches the format below.

First names of all members + Hero's Journey

For example: Sabrina, Nikki, Ashley, and Caroline- Hero's Journey

Group Members Names	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.</li> <li>2.</li> <li>3.</li> <li>4.</li> <li>5.</li> </ol>
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##### Literature Circle Organization

Half of the literature circles will be threaded discussions posts like we did last time, and these will take place over three days. The other half of the meetings will be live discussions in Zoom breakout groups.

##### Literature Circle Responsibilities

In order to carry on a detailed and thoughtful conversation at each circle meeting, you will need to do a few things **before** class begins on the day of a discussion post or a Zoom breakout group discussion.

- Read the designated pages that your group decides upon for each meeting.
- Complete a response log entry and submit it before class begins.
- Come up with at least one thought-provoking discussion prompt for each meeting. The minimum for this prompt is one question, but feel free to include more if there are multiple topics that you would like to discuss.
- Actively participate in the threaded discussions and the Zoom breakout groups.
  - For threaded discussions, we will move through three days of posts. Day 1- post your original question. Day 2- Reply to all group members' original questions. Day 3- Reply to all peers who answered your original discussion question.
  - For live discussions, your group will have a 20 minute discussion in your Zoom breakout group. You should come prepared with discussion questions, flagged passages that you thought were interesting, connections to personal or real-world issues, and anything else that you want to discuss.

### Grades for Literature Circles

- Your participation in the threaded discussion boards will contribute to your weekly classwork grade. This grade will be based on your original post, your responses to your group members' posts, and your replies to posts on your original topic. I will use the rubric below to determine the grade for literature circle discussion posts.

Description	Points
Question Prompt: The student's original question should be thought-provoking, and it should be posted before class or at the beginning of independent work.	1/3 of the assignment
Replies to Peers' Questions: The students' replies to peers' questions are thoughtful and detailed. Replies should be at least three strong sentences in length.	1/3 of the assignment
Replies to Peers' Posts on Their Question: The students' replies to posts on their original question are thoughtful and detailed. These replies should be at least two sentences in length.	1/3 of the assignment

\*Points will be deducted for late posts and for posts with significant errors in spelling and capitalization.

- Your participation in the live Zoom breakout group discussions will contribute to your weekly classwork grade. This grade will partially come from the small written report that your group will provide at the end of each live meeting. The rest of the grade will come from my observations. I will periodically pop into each breakout group and stay for a few minutes. During my observation, I expect to hear/see all group members participating meaningfully. If one group member is not participating at all, that person will lose classwork points. If the entire group is silent for an extended period of time, the entire group will lose classwork points. (\*If you are absent on the day of a live Zoom discussion, you will need to complete a make up assignment. Contact Mrs. Smith via Remind or email if this happens.)
- Your reading logs are due before class begins on the day of a literature circle meeting. These reading logs count as homework grades.
- Throughout the unit, your group members will complete a hero's journey analysis assignment for your literature circle book. This assignment will go into the gradebook as a quiz grade.
- At the end of this unit, you will complete an extended writing assignment called a critical analysis (thesis, two A-C-E-C-E paragraphs, and a few closing sentences). This assignment will take the place of your literature test and will count the same as a test grade.

### Reading Schedule

Use the chart below to make a reading schedule for your literature circle book based on our literature circle meeting dates. Keep in mind that our unit includes Thanksgiving break, so your group might decide to split your book as evenly as possible between all 6 meetings, or you might choose to read more over the break. Whatever you choose, remember to stop at logical

spaces in the book (such as the end of a chapter).

Title of Book: Author:  Total Number of Pages:
---------------------------------------------------------

	Thursday, November 19 Threaded Discussion Board	Tuesday, November 24 Zoom Breakout Group Discussion	Monday, November 30 Threaded Discussion Board	Thursday, December 3 Zoom Breakout Group Discussion	Monday, December 7 Threaded Discussion Board	Thursday, December 10 Zoom Breakout Group Discussion
Pages/ Chapters to Read						

#### Expectations and Structure for Live Zoom Discussions

During class on Monday, November 23, we will set expectations and discuss how your group wants to structure your live conversations. We'll look at a model and discuss the options for your literature circle structures.

Group Expectations	Conversation Structure

#### Group and Individual Reflection

After each Zoom breakout group discussion, we will take a moment to reflect on both the live discussion and the previous threaded discussion board. The space below is where you will keep up with group and individual reflections and goals.

	Individual Member Reflections *Put your name by a bullet point, reflect on how things went for you in both the live and threaded discussion, and make a personal goal for next time.
Tuesday, November 24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>

Thursday, December 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>
Thursday, December 10	<p>Overall, what did you personally excel at during the live and threaded discussions? What do you need to keep working on in future English classes?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>

### Group Hero's Journey Analysis

Throughout the unit, your group will work together to complete this assignment, which will count as a quiz grade. Group members should take turns adding to the chart. When I track the changes in the document, I should see that all group members have contributed.

In the purple column, describe (in at least 4 sentences) how your literature circle book contains each stage of the hero's journey. For brevity, I have not included the descriptions of each stage in this chart. For a full explanation of each stage, see your hero's journey notes.

In the purple column, include at least two quotes to go along with each stage of the hero's journey. Be sure to include the page numbers.

Stage of the Hero's Journey	How is this stage reflected in your literature circle book?	Quotes from the Book
1. The Call		

2. The Threshold		
3. The Descent		
4. Test and Ordeals		
5. Into the Abyss		
6. The Transformation		
7. The Atonement		
8. The Return		

## Appendix G

### Response Log Entry Instructions

#### Requirements:

- Title and date your log entry
  - Example: *Native Son* pages 1-50, August 14, 2020
  - Example: *One Hundred Years of Solitude* chapters 1-2, August 14, 2020
- Your response should be at least 200 words in response. It should include both personal and analytical responses, and you may include comprehension notes as well if you need to take them.

#### Comprehension Responses

This is an optional first response if you read something and are confused. Record your thoughts so that you can get clarification from your peers or from your teacher before or during class.

\*If there is a reading check, be sure that you get clarification before class.

- Summarize what you read.
- Write down questions about things that you are confused about.
- Look up words that cause confusion in the text.
- Take notes on the setting and/or characters.
- Create a drawing/character map to help you understand the setting, the characters, and what happened in the story.

#### Personal Responses

Personal responses to literature helps us understand and remember what we're reading. It is a necessary first step in order to be able to analyze a text.

- Make connections (personal, historical, literary, etc.).
- Write your opinions of characters, events, author's choices, etc.
- Record questions that you want to discuss in class or questions that you have for the author.
- Put yourself in a character's shoes. What would you have done?
- Create a drawing or a collage demonstrating your connections to the story.

#### Analytical Responses

This is where we dig deep into the text. We consider the larger significance of things that we noticed, we consider why the author made certain choices, and we apply critical theory lenses to help us look at the text in different ways.

- Notice and consider the meaning of themes and symbols
- Analyze the author's craft and choices—Why did they structure the story this way? Why create this character this way? Why use this particular phrasing?
- Do some further research to get historical context.
- Apply a critical theory lens.
- Create discussion questions that require your peers to make an analytical response.
- Create a drawing or collage depicting major themes, character development, symbolism, etc.

## Example Response Log

*A Gathering of Old Men* chapters 1-6, July 29, 2020

## Comprehension

- Is Lou Candy's boyfriend? She asked for Lou to come to the scene of the crime, but she didn't say who he was to her.

## Personal

- I think that Candy, the main white character in the novel, is guilty of paternal racism. She says that she wants to protect the black people on her father's old land, but she tends to treat them like children and like they can't take care of themselves. She means well, and she probably wouldn't consider herself a racist, but her actions hold back the black community just as much as overt racism does.
- If I had the money and power that Candy has in her community, I would use it to try to empower the community and provide opportunities for education and better jobs. That would create actual change in the community rather than keeping everyone stuck in the past.

## Analytical

- It's really amazing how Gaines structures this novel. It's essentially a murder novel in a very racially charged Louisiana town in the 1970s, and each chapter is told from a different character's perspective (although, having flipped forward in the book, there are a few characters who have multiple chapters). That must have been really difficult to manage as opposed to just writing from one perspective, but this choice makes it clear that this murder is affecting the entire community.
- The tractor is mentioned in nearly every chapter, so it has got to be important. What do you think it symbolizes and why?

## Appendix H

### Summative Writing Prompt

In this final literature assessment, you will complete what the English teachers at our school have coined a Critical Analysis. It is essentially a shortened literary analysis essay consisting of a thesis, two A-C-E-C-E paragraphs, and a closing sentence or two. As with previous A-C-E-C-E paragraphs, you can write the entire critical analysis in advance, and you can reach out for help if you need it. Your finished critical analysis is due by midnight on **Tuesday, December 15**, which is the last school day before exams start.

#### Requirements

- Your thesis should state specifically what you're going to argue in both paragraphs, and it should be specific to your chosen prompt.
- The first sentence of each body paragraph should state what you will cover in that paragraph.
- Each paragraph should have two direct quotes from your literature circle book, both introduced and cited correctly.
- Each paragraph should contain thorough analysis that delves into the significance of your quotes and connects back to your thesis.
- Your concluding sentence(s) should bring everything to a close and emphasize the interpretation that you set out to prove in the thesis.
- There should be no spelling or capitalization errors in your writing, and you should check carefully for comma errors, fragments, and run-on sentences.

#### Prompts (choose **ONE** of the prompts below)

1. In the "Tests and Ordeals" portion of the journey, the hero learns valuable lessons and skills that will eventually help the hero survive the "Abyss," which is the hero's most dangerous enemy or most difficult situation. What lessons and/or skills does your hero learn that lead to your hero overcoming the "Abyss"?
2. During the "Tests and Ordeals" stage, many heroes meet mentors and allies who help the hero on his/her/their journey. Explore two such side characters and analyze how they help the hero overcome the "Abyss" as well as what they contribute to the overall story.
3. As a result of surviving the "Abyss," the hero experiences character growth in the "Transformation" stage. Analyze how your hero changed and grew as a person because of the "Abyss" that they survived. (Either identify two changes or compare the character at the end to how the character was at the beginning in order to demonstrate character development).
4. In the final state of the journey, the hero must return to everyday life and the new status quo, and for some heroes, this is the most challenging part. Explore how your character adapts to normal life again and predict what challenges your character may face in the future based on evidence at the end of your novel.

## Critical Analysis Rubric

Criteria	Expectations	Mastery	Approaching	Average	Needs Improvement	No Response/ Did not Attempt
Thesis	Your thesis is specific and clearly answers the prompt in an analytic way.	20	15	10	5	0
Topic Sentences	Your claims must be clearly stated and include logical reasoning.	15	12	8	5	0
Citations (evidence from the text)	There are at least two strong and relevant quotes in each body paragraph. It must be clear where the evidence comes from. All evidence should be introduced with a transition statement and should have a correct citation.	15	12	8	5	0
Explanation	All evidence must be thoroughly analyzed and clearly connected back to the thesis.	20	15	10	5	0
Grammar and Clarity	Your work must be written clearly and must demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage.	15	12	8	5	0
Concluding Statement(s)	Your concluding statement(s) bring all of your ideas together and emphasize the significance of the topic.	15	12	8	5	0