

# Literary Clubs

## Enhancing Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing Skills

**L**iterary clubs can enhance critical thinking, reading, and writing; facilitate achievement through extra-curricular activities; and link theory to practice. Encouraging students from elementary to college level to become involved with literary clubs increases their motivation and achievement, and will help them become critical thinkers and readers, as well as creative college-level writers.

At present, however, educators are focusing on college freshmen, for many high school students arrive at college with poor literary skills. Literary clubs are one proven approach for helping such students to develop critical thinking, reading, and writing skills that they will need to succeed in college.

### Goal and Purpose

One of the main goals of the Reading Excellence Act (REA) is for every child to be able to read by the end of the 3rd grade. During the past few years, much has been accomplished at the elementary level through the use of programs such as Read-a-thons, Book-Worm Programs, and Parents' Reading Night. Yet, there is still a great need for similar programs for college students. Undoubtedly, they too could get involved with a book buddy program and read to younger students, or a Read Across America Day. But in order to challenge older students and get them interested in literary pursuits, numerous literary ventures are needed. There is considerable evidence showing that young adults can become motivated enough to raise their proficiency levels in reading and writing. "The development of high student motivation and positive attitudes toward reading is critical to students' success."<sup>1</sup>

One thing is clear: In order to facilitate reading success, the teacher should use any method, technique, or strategy that will hone students' skills and increase their interest in critical thinking, reading, and writing performance. Sometimes, this means just motivating students to discover creative ways to enhance their own literacy skills. Janet Emig states this very clearly: "Learning doesn't always follow teaching but leads a marvelously independent life of its own."<sup>2</sup> When we help students maximize these abilities, we help them create fulfilling, independent lives for themselves.

### The Problem

Schools have always been populated with students who don't achieve required

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academic standards. These students are often found "sitting on the threatening boundaries of the classroom." They are often designated as "slow learners" and are sidelined to remedial or vocational tracks.<sup>3</sup>

The problem facing us is this: What happens to the student who arrives at college with inadequate skills in the areas of reading, basic comprehension, and writing? What is the educator's role in helping

students who have not received the help they needed at the elementary and secondary levels? When we identified this problem at Oakwood College in Huntsville, Alabama, I knew that I had to think fast to find effective techniques for dealing with a number of reluctant readers, mostly college freshmen, who registered for my EN-099 Developmental Reading Course. These students had gaps in their knowledge and were deficient in basic literary skills. How could I help them to experience academic success?

### The Solution

After much thought and research, I realized that "one of the keys to success in college is motivation," and "[m]otivation, like political persuasion, is developed and learned over a period of time."<sup>4</sup> Of course, students had to learn to

BY CECILY DALY

**“A Celebration of Reading” was the theme of the book fair, which included the community and students from different levels.**

take responsibility for their learning, but I needed to link my instruction to their basic interests. This would motivate them and enhance their achievement.

Over time, I had observed that certain students seemed highly motivated by a reading club and library experiences. I decided to incorporate those strategies into my class. That decision proved to be the turning point for many of my developmental reading students.

About 10 years ago, I started with a small reading club in a developmental reading class at the Center of Academic Advancement (CAA). Since then, I have become more convinced that academic clubs will do for students what instructors are unable to do during regular class periods. My idea has mushroomed into a successful literary club with numerous activities, some of which are described below.

**Getting Started**

Starting anything worthwhile is never easy, but it becomes more manageable when handled in steps:

• **Begin where the interest lies.** Start with a nucleus of interested students. This is easy to do in a class situation. One of my class periods started as a Show and Tell session and ended with a Writing/Reading Club Suggestions session. Adding the new ideas I gathered during that period to my original plan broadened my perspective as I proceeded to the next step.

• **Publicize the plan to the student body.** Announcements and fliers work well to catch the attention of the rest of the students, and light the flame of curiosity and interest. So our club, which included several students who were not in the class, started with a bang.

**The hands-on writing workshop challenged students to make the most of their abilities.**

• **Utilize each person’s talent.** For the club members, this proved to be a source of inspiration and interest. In seeking faculty support, it is important to select someone who is eager to work as a sponsor.

• **Vary the activities.** Plan not only reading and writing activities within the club, but also outside-of-club activities. Try a club newsletter. First, we selected a newsletter editor. The editor worked well with us, and the fervor spread to other members. Soon, many students participated. Some wrote articles, and others planned the layout as they focused on reading and writing activities. This motivated the members and kept them working together, while having fun.

• **Keep your club fresh with new ideas.** Encourage students to try new things. As we did this, we noticed that when students were motivated, this positively affected their achievement.

• **Look around for additional ideas.** After you have worked with various reading and writing projects year in and year out, it becomes more difficult to keep up your ex-

**The campus-wide book fair helped at-risk students change their attitudes and enhanced their motivation.**

citement and that of your students. At this point, you will need to again catch the attention of your customers. One plan that worked well for me was to celebrate a month of reading. I selected the month of November and dubbed it “The Reading/Writing Connection—The Right to Know.” Club members and sponsors got together for a brainstorming session to generate activities for the agenda. Members then made their selections from the long list of possible ideas.

1. *Combining reading and writing was a high priority.* As Lipson and Wixson stated: “A somewhat different . . . approach to improved reading comprehension ability involves providing much more extensive experience with writing. Programs that promote a process (versus product) view of writing have great potential for enhancing students’ reading as well as writing abilities.”<sup>25</sup>

After careful thought, the club launched Poetry Parties: These add much interest to a project if they have creative names. We held two parties: (a) an open poetry reading session in which students were asked to bring their favorite original poems to read; and (b) a closed poetry reading session in which the poetry reading was pre-planned and selected from popular authors.

*Poets’/Authors’ Chair:* The first is a poetry-reading session in which students are asked to occupy the Poets’ Chair as they read their favorite creations. For the Authors’ Chair, an invited author, local or foreign, spends an evening with the students.

*Book Link* (Centennial Book Link) is a read-a-thon geared to college-level students. It was designed so that students could gather information relating to a special campus event (Oakwood Centennial).

2. *Writing Activities:* We solicited original essays and poetry in several categories

for the Essay/Poetry Writing Contest. The goal was to select articles written by the college family and showcase them in a devotional. These articles were judged in a semi-final and a final evaluation. Awards were given at the final session. This project generated more interest than we had imagined.

Unfortunately, Penpal League, a card and letter writing project, was not as successful as the College Experience Writing Contest.

3. *Workshops.* The Right-to-Write Workshop, a two-day article-writing workshop by a prominent magazine editor, caught the attention of many students and quite a few community members. Building on its success, we scheduled Hands-On Writing, a week-long article-writing workshop for those who wanted to write for youth-oriented magazines. Those who enrolled in the workshop learned about a variety of topics such as: Elements of Good Writing; Developing Better Writing Skills/What Editors Look for, and How to Critique Your Own Writing. Everyone shared in the joys of accomplishment when the Oakwood College edition of the magazine was published.

A Writer-in-Residence Weekend was the next activity. This special weekend featured mini-article-writing workshops presented by a prominent magazine editor, and seemed to be the highlight of the school year. The dual purpose of this special weekend was

- To give new writers an overview of what it takes to become published, and
- To help professional authors discover the right market for their work.

"A Celebration of Reading" used the slogan "Hats Off to Literary Links Month." We set aside a special time for the campus family, friends, and other literary-minded people to celebrate Literary Links. This festival featured a wealth of informative activities that brought alive the pages of books, journals, and newspapers. During the month of November, the Literary Links Club provided an opportunity for individuals to celebrate a variety of topics, and to let the community realize that they had the "Right to Know." Since reading is the key to knowledge, club members shared the idea that getting involved in the Literary Links Club was the best way to participate in literary activities that would integrate each person into campus life. Early on the morning of November 1, a proclamation was read over the intercom in the various dormitories, declaring it

a special day. An official announcement followed on the college radio station.

**A**t the opening session of Literary Links Month, a keynote address, "The Marriage of Reading and Writing: No Divorce," was given by a vivacious professor. A reception with musical background followed in the English Department. Various activities continued throughout the month, with the tempo of student interest increasing. Prizes and awards were given during the closing ceremony of Literary Links Month. This was an extra special affair, with a guest speaker. Campus discussion revealed that the program had made an impact on the students.

### Miscellaneous Activities

Our campus-wide book fair, called "A Celebration of Reading," was the largest single activity. It allowed local bookstores to become involved with a literary project on the campus and generated much interest in the total reading program. Elementary students participated from 9-11:30 a.m., academy students from 11:30-1:30 p.m., and college students and community members from 11:30 until the book fair closed at 3:00 p.m. Because of this campus-wide focus on reading, a number of students were greatly motivated and became involved with the club. The local library, Barnes and Noble bookstore, Baptist Books and Supplies, and Oakwood Bookstore participated. The bookstores contributed discount vouchers, while the businesses provided other incentives. One local department store donated 50 dictionaries, McDonald's supplied drink and coupons, and a local baker gave bread and cakes for a bake sale, which provided the club with petty cash.

### Conclusion

Our goal was to motivate reluctant readers and to help students become competent and enthusiastic readers. As the program expanded and involved more students, it produced heightened motivation and literary achievement. The rewards far surpassed our expectations. We were able to go beyond academics to reach out to the community with our services. The literary club, sponsors, students, and some community members linked service with learning and wit-

nessed to their faith. Critical thinking, reading, and writing were presented in a variety of formats that allowed students to gain knowledge and practice their skills in fun ways.

Schools must teach every child to read by the end of the 3rd grade and also pursue those who have fallen between the cracks. Teachers must seek out the forgotten ones, the strugglers, some of whom are non-traditional students, and empower them to use critical thinking, reading, and writing skills so that college work will not appear so intimidating to them. By focusing on student-centered goals and providing a variety of opportunities, schools can increase at-risk students' reading achievement and writing proficiency while keeping student interest high.

The rewards are great. Using the suggestions in this article will enable you to savor the joys of accomplishment as you watch students enhance their thinking, reading, and writing skills and succeed in school. ☺

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