



Literary Clubs

Promoting Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing Skills

College educators whose student body includes large numbers of freshmen who are underprepared, non-traditional students, teens, and minorities will face special challenges in facilitating reading, writing, and critical-thinking skills. While classroom assignments are essential, extra-curricular activities are a creative and entertaining way to sharpen students' writing skills. The forgotten ones, the strugglers, the non-traditional students, referred to by Mike Rose as "sitting on the threatening boundaries of the classroom"¹ must not be overlooked. Teachers and mentors must empower these students to use critical thinking, reading, and writing skills so that college assignments will not intimidate them.

Over the years, literary clubs have proved a successful and enjoyable approach to assist students who find themselves challenged by academic standards in the college/university environment.

The university academic club is one such organization. This club can extend a welcome to all who want to develop an appreciation of varied extracurricular activities foundational to college reading and English classes. This type of club meets to read original poetry, review books, and learn writing tips; visits literary and historical locations; and conducts activities that enhance critical thinking, reading, and writing. It may also publish a quarterly newsletter.

The Oakwood University Literary Guild, an affiliate of American Christian Writers (ACW), is the 27th chapter of this 80-chapter national organization, and the first and only ACW chap-

ter in Alabama. However, before assuming its present name, the club experienced several name changes: The Reading Club, Reading/Writing Club, and Literary Links.

This type of academic club uses a variety of methods to achieve literary excellence. Historical perspectives, integration of faith and learning, service learning, and academic perspectives all enhance that goal. Included in this quest for literary excellence is the challenge of promoting a Christ-centered atmosphere that enables club members to integrate faith and learning in every aspect of the club life and activities.

By focusing on student-centered goals and providing a variety of opportunities, schools can help at-risk students increase their reading achievement and writing proficiency while

BY CECILY DALY

keeping student interest high. To that end, each November has been designated as the Month of Literary Creations on the Oakwood University campus, when the focus is on producing various literary creations.

Historical Perspective

The year 1985 saw increased activity within the reading classes at Oakwood University, and this sprouted the seeds of what would become a new and permanent club: the Reading Club, established in 1986 in the Reading Lab of the Developmental Resource Center, now known as the Center for Academic Success. The group's first notable events were a "Fall Leaves Reading Fest" and a book fair called "A Celebration of Reading."

The mission of this club was to provide out-of-class assistance for students as well as in-class interest-based activities that would enhance their literary skills through critical reading, creative writing, and a variety of fun activities. Since its inception, the club has sponsored numerous activities, including a Fall Leaves Reading Festival, Month of Reading, educational book fairs, International Culture Fest/Tasting Fair, educational trips, poetry parties, Author's Chair, book links, and article-writing competitions.

Annual writing workshops, author-in-residence weekends, and Accolades, which was geared to combine reading and writing, have added both interest and motivation to the sessions. In addition, students' articles and poems have been consistently published in recognized publications. Also, since 2001, the club has maintained a need-based textbook scholarship for deserving students.

This article provides a brief overview of some of the club's literary contributions and educational services to the community. During the past 28 years, the club has held several writing work-

shops, aired five radio programs, produced one international play, hosted three annual campus-wide educational book fairs, and published several inspirational books: *Joy Notes 1, 2, and 3*; a prayer devotional, a prayer journal, the 25th-anniversary souvenir journal, *Therapy of the Brush*, as well as more than 300 articles. The Guild, a club of committed students, has been guided and directed by committed sponsors who lead talented but inexperienced young people into the literary arena.

Faith and Learning Perspective

University Guild planners have given much thought to building a strong, spiritual overtone that will keep the guild moving forward. Special effort has been expended to integrate faith and learning in order to enhance the development of mind, body, and spirit. Oakwood University's Literary Guild promotes a biblical, Seventh-day Adventist perspective while promoting learning.

Each annual consecration ceremony focuses on a biblical theme, such as, "Stir up the gift of God which is in you" (2 Timothy 1:6, NKJV)²; or, "Write the vision, and make it plain" (Habakkuk 2:2). Christian workshop presenters have been carefully selected from editorial employees of the church's publishing

houses and AdventSource to enhance the integration of faith and learning. Students are excited to see their submissions published in *Insight*, *Cornerstone Connection*, *Collegiate Quarterly*, *Message*, *Women of Spirit*, and the Women's Ministries devotional books. The club has published four volumes of their own inspirational works, which are known in the international community.

Service Learning

Service Learning (SL) offers a quality performance-based approach to learning. The 10- to 15-hour service-learning slot in English Education classes is linked with the guild and represents an effort to facilitate learning. Service learning provides opportunities for students to acquire practical knowledge while improving their academic learning as they participate in enjoyable structured activities. These interactive, informative, and innovative projects link students' academic knowledge with community needs.

First, students identify needs in the community. They then structure a plan to benefit members of a specific group. Thus, the club has been able to venture beyond academics as they learn how to help various groups.

Page 41 photo: Literary Guild supporters discuss the plans for the Textbook Scholarship. Left to right: Cecily Daly, founder and sponsor; Ingrid Ennis and Deril Wood, Oakwood University education faculty members; Michael Sales, marketing consultant; and Rhoda Benjamin, a participant in the Kenya Book Project.



Literary Guild Fest/Tasting Fair



Students' Literary Guild publications

Literacy Guild Community Projects

- The Adopt-a-School project venture by the Literary Guild has worked well. Club members visit students in a selected school, read to them, help them with English projects, and engage them in mentoring sessions.
- Elderly homebound people have been cheered with prose and poetry readings through an Adopt-a-Grandparent project.
- Local Spanish-speaking 5th- and 6th-grade students have received assistance to better communicate in English through an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) tutorial.
- Earliteen youth have been taught to communicate with pen pals in New York and Chicago.
- The Hands-in-Action earliteen group has been engaged in a Pause and Pray workshop with prayer journaling, as well as arts and crafts sessions.
- Club members have also worked with the local Boys and Girls Clubs and Oakwood University's Youth Ministries Department.
- Recent service-learning projects include the unveiling of the "Young Writer's Project" and mentoring a group of Latino adults who want to learn English.

During November each year, the University Literary Guild provides opportunities for individuals to celebrate a variety of topics related to the three rights of the club. These rights, established in 2000, are still essential today:

"the right to know, the right to read, and the right to write." The right to write matches the university's Quality Enhancement Plan, an accreditation requirement that focuses on the improvement of critical thinking skills through writing. The plan emphasizes bringing clarity and strength to writing through use of the elements of thinking, a model of critical thinking by Paul and Elder³ and Nosich.⁴

Academic Perspective

The Literary Guild has an academic component. Book fairs (educational or general) readily capture the interest of youth at the elementary, academy, and college levels. Two of the more memorable book fairs were "Hats Off to Literary Links" and "A Celebration of Reading."

Using the first slogan, "Hats Off to Literary Links," in 1999, we set aside a special time for the campus family that also included students, community friends, and other literary-minded people. This festival featured information and activities that brought to life the pages of books, newspapers, and journals through displays and shows. Participants competed for prizes and other incentives. Since reading was promoted as the key to knowledge, club members emphasized that getting involved was important—indeed, probably the best way to integrate literary activities into a campus program.

Another campus-wide educational

book fair, "A Celebration of Reading," was the largest single, one-day activity that catered to elementary, academy, and college students. This project generated much interest and became an annual affair for three years. Elementary students participated from 9:00 to 11:30 a.m., academy students from 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., and college students and community members joined in from 1:30 until the book fair closed at 3:00 p.m.

The campus-wide focus on reading motivated a number of students to become involved with the club and with writing. The Huntsville-Madison County Public Library, Barnes and Noble bookstore, Lifeway Christian Books and Supplies, and the Oakwood University bookstore contributed discount vouchers, while businesses provided other incentives. One local department store donated 50 dictionaries. McDonald's supplied drink and food coupons, and a local baker provided bread and cakes for a bake sale. Community members were invited to share their family and ethnic recipes, as well as written stories about the recipes. A later service-learning experience, which we called Literary Guild Culture Fest/Tasting Fair, involved more members than ever before.

Twelve Steps to Building and Maintaining Successful Literary Clubs

Building and maintaining literary clubs that motivate college students to engage in critical thinking, reading,

and creative writing can be challenging. However, it becomes manageable when divided into small steps:

1. Find a sponsor who is passionate about writing and working with students.
2. Find a capable public relations person who will publicize the club to the student body and the community.
3. Start with an exciting event to grab students' attention.
4. Use the talents of a nucleus of interested students.
5. Form working teams and organize in-house writing competitions.
6. Vary the writing activities.
7. Keep the club fresh with new ideas; young people like change.
8. Display and reward members' accomplishments.
9. Increase student involvement and enjoyment; encourage the use of computers.⁵
10. Find and incorporate additional ideas and opportunities.
11. Use regular announcements and fliers to arouse the curiosity, interest, and attention of the campus population.
12. Work with the school librarians to develop a Literary Alcove in the library.

Step 12 has served as a great advertisement for the Literary Guild's activities in the college community. It was a College Reading Strategies class that started a show-and-tell session, which culminated with the school's first reading/writing club.

Promote Process, Not Product

According to Lipson and Wixson, "A somewhat different . . . approach to improved reading comprehension ability involves providing an extensive experience with writing,"⁶ so don't be afraid to try something new. Use the following process-writing ideas, which have great potential for enhancing students' critical thinking, reading, and writing abilities.

- **Poets' Chair:** Student club members and local or foreign authors are invited to participate by occupying the Poet's Chair (decorated for the occasion) as they share their literary creations with attendees.

- **Book Link (Centennial Book Link):** A read-a-thon geared to college-

level students. This project allows them to read and record 100 pages of material of their choice.

- **Essay/Poetry Contest:** Original essays and poetry from several categories are solicited from the college family. These works are evaluated, showcased, and given awards.

- **The Pen Pal League:** a card- and letter-writing project and online pen pal league that can also be used with younger students. This encourages them to first write their stories, and then progress to more complex articles.

- **Poetry Parties:** open or closed poetry reading sessions, which add much interest to creatively titled projects.

Writing Workshops That Capture Interest and Work Wonders

1. **Right-to-Write Workshop:** a two-day writing workshop by a prominent magazine editor or book author.

2. **Hands-On Writing:** a week-long writing workshop for those who want to write for magazines, featuring a variety of topics such as Elements of Good

Writing, Developing Better Writing Skills, What Editors Look for, and How to Critique Your Writing.

3. **A Writer-in-Residence Weekend:** a writing workshop presented by a prominent magazine editor or book author, whose purposes are as follows:

- To seize the attention of community members and invite their participation;
- To give new writers an overview of what it takes to be published;
- To help professional authors discover the right market for their work.

Literary Art and Expression

Janet Emig, a leading writing and pedagogy expert, says, "No matter how well we teach, learning belongs to the student."⁷ She adds, "Learning doesn't always follow teaching, but leads a marvelously independent life of its own."⁸ When students are able to maximize their abilities, this helps them create fulfilling, independent lives. Facilitating reading success, then, must be the goal of mentors, instructors, and sponsors,



The advertisement features a woman with long dark hair, wearing a dark blazer, standing in a classroom. She is holding a red pen and looking towards the camera with a slight smile. In the background, there is a chalkboard and a logo for CIRCLE (circle.adventist.org). The text is overlaid on the bottom right of the image.

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who should use every method, technique, and strategy available to hone students' skills and increase their interest in critical thinking, reading, and writing performance. One strategy that has worked well for Oakwood University is the National African American Read-In Chain, which occurs during the first week of February.

In addition, the Literary Art and Expression Workshop has allowed us to incorporate art and literary expression into a club where people could engage their artistic talents by producing paintings and writing about them. The workshop sessions were arranged in pairs. Session 1 was the painting session; Session 2 was the literature information session, which included an expression or writing activity. This approach piqued the interest of students with an inadequate literary background, enabling them to develop their interest and writing skills and to achieve a measure of academic success. The reading/review sessions reminded them of their right to read, and provided a way for them to read books on their own, after which they met and discussed the books at length, and sometimes wrote reviews about them.

Working with a large number of reading and writing projects on a yearly basis can become tedious for planners and members, making it more difficult to maintain their enthusiasm. That's the time to infuse the organization with the enthusiasm of new participants. One plan that worked well for the guild was to celebrate November as a month of reading. Club members and their sponsors gathered for a brainstorming session to generate activities for the new school year.

When students are motivated, their achievement improves. Recently, the president of the club questioned what could be done to reignite the group. The response, from a young foreign national, was a surprise but served as strong motivation for the club. He said, "Write a story book for third graders, with each club member submitting one story." The project, based on values clarification (kindness, honesty, forgiveness) is now underway and includes various activities, puzzles,

and games. The club has been energized as the members write. There is no limit to what can be done with motivated group members.

A club newsletter has helped students realize that they have the "right to write." We selected an editor whose fervor was contagious and who would request articles and focus on reading/writing activities. This kept members motivated and having fun together. Utilizing each one's talent proved to be a source of inspiration and interest. Faculty support by an eager, passionate sponsor worked wonders, too.

Student-Centered Goals

The goal of a literary club is to motivate reluctant readers and to help struggling students become strategic readers and proficient writers. As the program has expanded and involved more student participation at Oakwood University, it has produced heightened motivation and greater literary achievement. The rewards have far surpassed expectations.

We have been able to expand beyond mere academics to reach out into the community with our services. The literary club, sponsors, students, and some community members have linked service with learning and witnessed to their faith. Critical thinking, reading, and writing have been presented in a variety of formats that empower students to practice their skills in interesting and fun-filled ways. By planning and focusing on student-centered goals and providing a variety of opportunities, the club helps at-risk students increase their reading achievement and writing proficiency while maintaining student motivation.

Like other literary clubs, the Oakwood University Literary Guild seeks to enhance critical thinking, reading, and creative writing. It also provides publication opportunities, literary activities, and a service-learning component. Organizing and maintaining such a club can be demanding, but the rewards are great. Using the suggestions in this article will enable you to savor the joys of accomplishment as you watch students discover their latent abilities; integrate faith and

learning; enhance their thinking, reading, and writing skills; feel justifiably proud of their literary progress; and succeed on their academic journey. ✍

This article has been peer reviewed.



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