

Reflections on the chapters of a book club: Implications for a community of practice

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Abstract:

This reflective essay is about the experience of facilitating two book clubs at a Canadian research-intensive university, thinking about the process of how a book club became a community of practice (CoP), and the practical aspects of setting up and administering a book club. The process and outcome of the first book club was as expected, we read the chapters, met and discussed the readings, and then went on our way back to our practice of teaching. When the second book club was scheduled, most of the original participants joined. This time, an unexpected outcome of the book club was that it developed into a CoP. As a group of multi-disciplinary teachers, we began to discuss how this occurred, and are embracing the opportunities it has presented. We are planning on developing a writing project about the process, our individual reflections on our learning and experiences, and contributing some specialized discipline knowledge to the article.

Key Words:

book club, community of practice, discussion group, higher education, multi-disciplinary, reflective practice

Introduction

I must admit, a book club is not a trendy, 21st century cutting edge strategy in higher education! On the flip side, it is a time-honoured tradition, and people generally know what to expect when they join a book club. What I did not expect is how a book club I facilitated would develop into a community of practice (CoP).

This reflective essay is based on my experience facilitating two book clubs at a Canadian research-intensive university, the practical aspects of setting up and administering a book club, and thinking about the process of how a book club became a CoP. I consider myself a reflective practitioner and draw upon the work of Brookfield (1995) and his quote, "We teach to change the world" (p.1), and it is with this in mind

that I reflect and focus my practice of educational development: to influence the best teaching and learning possible.

Chapter One: Book Club

We first met as a group after inviting the university community to participate in a book club. The intent of the book club was to focus on reading the text of a keynote speaker, who was scheduled to present at an upcoming learning and teaching conference. It was expected the book club members would read and apply some of the teaching strategies gained from personal reflection, the discussion, plus generate interest to participate in the conference.

The term 'book club' was used because of the common understanding of the process and format. The book club was influenced by several works, including the 'slow scholarship' notion by Hartman and Darab (2012), that we learn, and process information when we take the time to think, and reflect. Levine et.al. (2007), provided a model for a faculty-driven book club (teaching ourselves), and we adopted Barthelme's (2014) practical guidelines, and Cassidy's (2011) checklist for book discussions. There is also evidence that an intentional, and organized book club is a classroom activity that promotes learning, (Scourfield & Taylor, 2014).

We met for one academic term, and as expected in group processes, some participants dropped out for various reasons. For those who remained there seemed to be a sense of community developing, and a growing interest to continue our discussions. At our last meeting, the participants unanimously asked for another book club to start again. With time, another book club was scheduled prior to the next teaching and learning conference. A new book by one of the keynote presenters was adopted by the book club. All of the previous participants were asked to join again, and a few more were recruited by referral. The book club was scheduled, and this time with more meeting dates. *Figure 1: Chapter one: Book club participants*, is a picture of the first book club group. We have continued the tradition to take a picture at the end of each book club.



Figure 1: Chapter one: Book club participants. Photo Credit, University of Calgary.

Chapter Two: Community of Practice

We came together for the second time as a book club, to reflect on and discuss teaching and learning, with the goal to develop and inform our practice in higher education. After several meetings and lively discussion, we all agreed we were more than a book club. Much discussion evolved around the term book club and what it really meant, and we asked ourselves maybe there was a better term to describe us. That is when the notion of a CoP was introduced. We drew upon the definition offered by Wenger-Trayner (2015, p.1) that “communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.” The passion we share as a group is teaching and learning. We are all ‘teachers’ in higher education: on a regular basis during the academic term, in professional development workshops and seminars, and as teaching assistants. We teach undergraduate and graduate students, teachers, and support staff. We all want the same outcome, to learn and develop our teaching practice to improve student learning.

One of the participants asked “how did we morph from a book club to a CoP?” We had no answers just ideas and reflections, which we will continue to explore, develop, and share. We are a diverse group and multi-disciplinary, yet we share the same values of teaching and learning development. Most of us knew each other from the first book club, and there was almost an immediate collegial connection. The meetings were comfortable, respectful, appreciative, and the discussion stimulating, which stretched and challenged our thinking. Another key element was the fact that we treated each other as equals, and we shared the leadership responsibility. Not one person monopolized the group which enhanced the group commitment and facilitated participation. We had moved from a discussion group to an action group to a community of practice.

How did we stay together as a group? It certainly wasn’t the venue or refreshments! We had adequate space in an old building (sometimes noisy), with modest refreshments. The timing was right for this group – over the lunch hour. Even with the addition of new participants, the book club maintained its congeniality, and we continued to evolve. Part of the success of this group was the planning, establishing a realistic schedule, adopting our own rules, and keeping connected. I also believe part of what kept us together and moving forward, was building trust in one another as we engaged and developed as a CoP. Gray & Summers (2015) refer to trust building as an integral part of the development of a CoP, which can only occur over time, and with a supportive environment. As we explore more about this book club and CoP, we will identify some of the factors that contributed to building trust, and what keeps us showing up, engaged, and motivated to share, discuss, and improve our teaching practice.

Chapter Three: Writing collaboratively

Early in our meeting schedule, the idea of a collaborative writing project was introduced. As the facilitator, I noticed after the decision to write an article was made, there seemed to be a shift in the focus and purpose of the group. The focus of our writing will be a comprehensive reflective piece. Each of the participants have agreed to

write a section on a particular focus based on their expertise, plus a reflective statement about their learnings, how the book club influenced their practice, and what they believe were the factors that kept us together as a book club and a CoP. I am currently working on some questions, and a conceptual lens that will inform and guide our reflections.

While writing this reflective essay, I realized I had not mentioned the discussion of the book itself. I am aware that the book selection is significant, but more important is the fact that we share common values, and a passion to discuss, debate, and reflect, which in turn, influences our practice, and moves us forward to create our next chapter. Some of the initial feedback from participants indicated what drew them to the book club in the first place was the book selection, and in this case on the topic of teaching and learning. What keeps us together is more than the book, and we will collectively explore the factors and processes that engage us, contribute to developing our practice, and inspire us in writing our next chapters.

In the next section, based on my experience, I have included some practical tips and strategies for anyone considering how a book club could contribute to the growth of a CoP, and a list of the artefacts produced thus far. In addition a book club 'how to guide' is being produced and will be posted on the Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning website <http://www.ucalgary.ca/taylorinstitute/resources>

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Appendices

Book Club:

Practical aspects and recommendations – reflections on my experience

- Like many aspects of teaching, it sounds simple to set up a book club. I think we all know there is nothing simple about teaching, and a book club is no different. It takes time and thoughtful planning. I consulted the literature for evidence and guidance, developed learning outcomes, administered and managed the schedule, and engaged the participants.
- If possible, do a quick survey of potential participants to find out what time to meet is best, and which books would they like to recommend.
- The small details are important, for example, finding the right room for discussion is paramount to a book club, building in a budget for refreshments, and the book.
- Even though the book club meetings were face-to-face, I added an online course in the learning management system (D2L). This was an efficient way to organize content, communicate with members, post items, and provide an ongoing forum for discussion.
- If you are planning on establishing a CoP, starting with a book club, journal club, or academic discussion group is a good method. It provides participants a purpose, and goal.
- Share the responsibility of the meetings: Invite participants to sign up at the beginning of the book club to take turns facilitating. This adds to the richness of the group because everyone gets to participate in various learning experiences, and observe different facilitation styles.
- If possible, I recommend hiring a research assistant to help out with many of the details, and provide ongoing support for participants.
- If you have a book sitting on the edge of your desk, or tucked in your bookcase that you haven't found the time to read – start a book club. You will read it, discuss it, and learn!

Book Club: Artefacts

Following the first book club, there were several opportunities to disseminate the knowledge gained and to share the experience. Currently, a proposal has been submitted to present about the book club at an international conference in fall 2016.

Conference presentation

Jeffs, C. (May 2015). *Reading and discussing teaching and learning: A book club experience*. The University of Calgary Conference on Postsecondary Learning and Teaching. <http://ucalgary.ca/taylorinstitute/teaching-community/sites/default/files/resources/2015%20Conference%20Program%20web.pdf>

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Blog

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