

Disrupting Literature: Facilitating Indigenous Book Clubs

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Abstract

Book clubs are typically spaces in which individuals can discuss their favourite young adult novel or interrogate controversial topics from best-selling non-fiction. At the same time, book clubs, and the literature read within, can also be used as tools of assimilation used to push political and social agendas. But what if the same book clubs that promote assimilation and conformity, privileging some literatures and forms above others, could be used as spaces to create new communities that celebrate other literatures? Book clubs can be a potential space for the discussion of lesser-known and suppressed Indigenous literatures while creating communities. However, facilitating Indigenous book clubs requires conscious planning and preparation to ensure that the book clubs engage with Indigenous literatures in an appropriate way. Additionally, facilitators, depending on the mandate, need to be in partnership with Indigenous communities to ensure that book clubs are the right program to incorporate. As such, this presentation will provide best practices for facilitating Indigenous book clubs, including topics such as determining book club mandates, selecting literatures, interpreting Indigenous texts, and creating respectful environments.

Keywords: book clubs, Indigenous literatures, Indigenous programming, relationality, community engagement

Book clubs are typically spaces in which individuals can discuss their favourite young adult novel or interrogate controversial topics from best-selling non-fiction. At the same time, book clubs, and the literature read within, can also be used as tools of assimilation used to push political and social agendas. In many ways, literary traditions

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are colonial products that serve to govern what is or is not literature, and, by doing so, privilege some voices while silencing others (Heath Justice, 2018). The same is often true of book clubs, in which the voices of marginalized communities are discounted as having little or no literary worth. Devin-Glass (2001) whose research looks at literary authority in women's book discussion groups, claims that book clubs tend to be spheres of discussion for white, middle-class females who use book clubs to "maintain their currency as literate citizens through group discussion" (p. 583). Within Indigenous communities, storytelling is vital means of remembering and preserving their identities, traditions, languages, and cultures. However, the exclusion of Indigenous literatures is a deliberate and political act, one which further legitimizes what has been referred to by others as a sort of "willful amnesia" in relation to past and ongoing colonial transgressions against Indigenous Peoples (Atkinson, 2017). It is within this social and political framework, that traditional book clubs become sites of epistemological struggle. But what if the same book clubs that promote assimilation and conformity, could be used as spaces to create new communities that celebrate other literatures? Within this framework, book clubs can provide spaces for broader community discussions while legitimizing Indigenous literatures as having literary worth.

Establishing Mandate

The facilitation of book clubs with a clear focus on Indigenous literatures, provides avenues for Indigenous cultures and knowledges to be respectfully discussed and celebrated. More importantly, Indigenous literatures allow Indigenous individuals to see themselves in the works they read. When facilitating and planning Indigenous book clubs, facilitators need to consider the mandate of their book club program, as it will determine the tone of the book club and influence book selection. When considering your mandate, consider some of the following questions: Is the book club going to be aimed at Indigenous readership, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers, or will you specify at all? What is the proposed age of the group? What is the purpose of your book club? Are you seeking to emphasize and highlight Indigenous Literatures? Are you just looking to add a couple of Indigenous texts to an existing book club? Or, are you looking to continue to educate and inform individuals on topics such as Reconciliation or Indigenous Cultures?

Selecting and Interpreting Texts

Facilitators must be careful and understand that Indigenous literatures are diverse literary forms and are therefore not limited to text. An Indigenous book club could provide the opportunity for storytelling outside of textual restraints. The book club could incorporate podcasts and invite Indigenous storytellers, for example. However, for the purposes of our research, we have limited our scope to Indigenous texts, but we hope in the future to expand our research to include oral and pictorial representations of Indigenous literatures in the facilitation of Indigenous book clubs. That being said, how does one go about selecting appropriate texts for their book club? We have identified three areas to consider when selecting texts in the facilitation of Indigenous book clubs.

Ethical Considerations

Take into consideration the ethical implications when selecting texts. This requires more work on the part of the facilitator, as they are responsible for ensuring that research (i.e. works of nonfiction) has been conducted ethically and that the resulting literature is both reliable and verified by the communities in question. As part of the ongoing discussion around the wide range of Indigenous identity positions it is important to be representative of diverse identities and perspectives and to move away from Pan-Indigenous perspective. Thus, facilitators ought to avoid claims of universal values shared between Indigenous peoples around the world. In addition, facilitators should be aware of problematic identity claims and controversies surrounding the works of particular authors. There are many Indigenous book lists that can be consulted for ideas when selecting a title for your book club. However, it is still important to thoroughly research authors and titles.

Local and Diverse Voices

Selecting authors from local communities provides an opportunity for facilitators to build relationships with Indigenous authors and draw attention to diverse works. Some book clubs have taken the opportunity to extend invitations to authors to join their sessions in order to celebrate the author and engage in meaningful discussions. However, be sure to include an honorarium for the author to thank them for their time

and help work toward relationality that is not exploitive. (Fraser, 2020). Furthermore, given the disproportionate attention given to certain Indigenous voices (i.e. straight male), facilitators may choose to prioritize works of Indigenous women and queer/two-spirit authors. If engaging with well-known authors, it is a good practice to select their more obscure or underappreciated works. (Heath-Justice, 2018).

Format and Accessibility

Books should be made available (and thereby accessible) to members in both ebook and print form— ideally from a local book vendor or the library. Once an author has been selected facilitators can reach out to publishers who may be willing to provide free copies of a book or engage with their local library community in order to purchase copies on their behalf. It is also a good idea to establish a relationship with a local book vendor to ensure that titles are in stock if a member chooses to purchase the book rather than borrow it (Fraser, 2020).

Creating Respectful Environments

In the words of Gwichyà Gwich'in historian and RISE's former Lead Book Club Coordinator, Crystal Gail Fraser, “relationality is key” (Fraser, 2020). Arguably, book clubs could be used as a furthering of relationality as communities meet to discuss the themes, representations, and concepts present in Indigenous literatures (Health Justice, 2018). It is important to emphasize a mentality of relationality among book club members which will influence the mindset of participants and help to ensure respectful communication is maintained. Facilitators should also be mindful of what D’Angelo (2011) refers to as “white fragility” in which individuals with “white” perspectives shape and manage situations to avoid challenges to white hierarchies. As facilitators, it will be important to be aware of these pressures and take necessary action in order to mediate the situation and be an effective ally.

Emotional Labour

Furthermore, recognize the potential for added emotional labour on behalf of Indigenous volunteers and book club participants. Do your research beforehand and be prepared to step in to help ease the emotional labour. As well, there needs to be a privileging of Indigenous cultures, perspectives, and knowledges. It is not the responsibility of the Indigenous members to “educate” the non-Indigenous. Moreover,

the inclusion of non-Indigenous individuals may add to the pressure for Indigenous members to “conform to or manage white expectations and assumptions of Aboriginal life and culture” (Nolan & Henaway, 2017, p. 798). Non-Indigenous LIS workers who might be helping to facilitate the book club should keep this in mind and reflect on their position within the group, potentially giving the role to someone else if they feel as though their involvement will jeopardize the mandate of the book club

Cultural Protocols

Be considerate of Cultural Protocols as appropriate. Cultural Protocols will vary based on the community in which the book club functions. For Nolan and Henaway (2017), creating culturally appropriate settings means incorporating introduction protocols that provide information about the individual’s “cultural and geographical location, personal history, context and relationships” (p. 792). As well, when facilitating the book clubs, LIS workers, following the lead of Heath Justice (2018) and others, should refer “to the specific name by which communities and writers most frequently identify themselves” (p. 8). Even advertising for the event should reflect respectful engagement with Indigenous perspectives. For example, capitalize Indigenous and refer to Indigenous Literatures as plural to avoid pan-Indigeneity. A great resource is Gregory Younging (2018)’s *Elements of Indigenous Style: A Guide for Writing by and about Indigenous Peoples* which provides a guide for appropriate terminology, specific to Canadian contexts.

Community Engagement

Community engagement is a critical component in establishing successful book clubs. Facilitators should begin by consulting and collaborating with Indigenous community members so as to ensure that in devising their mandate, the book club also meets the needs of the community and adheres to the cultural expectations and protocols that fit within the context of the book club. It’s also important to engage in relationship building. Work in collaboration with Indigenous community members to help facilitate the book clubs and select books. Also, be prepared for and receptive to feedback from Indigenous community members.

Finally, facilitators should consider engaging with local sponsors who may be willing to donate their space to host meetings or to even fund events (such as Q and A events with authors.) Applying this to a local context, Edmonton book clubs may choose to seek out partnerships with The Edmonton Public Library, the University of Alberta, or other organizations willing to donate their space and time.

Concluding Remarks

Ultimately, although historically used as means of political and social control, book clubs can have the potential to serve as viable Indigenous programming when planned with Indigenous communities, to create respectful spaces for discussion and reflection. By attempting to create culturally appropriate and respectful settings, LIS workers can hopefully build spaces for open dialogue about the works while also helping to foster a sense of community. In doing so, book clubs can challenge preconceived notions of Indigenous literatures while creating safe spaces to explore themes and create relationships. Our research will have hopefully provided some best practices and areas for consideration when planning and engaging in Indigenous book clubs.

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