

A Library Journal Club as a Tool for Current Awareness and Open Communication: University of British Columbia case study

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Journal clubs are well-established in many scientific disciplines as a means for academics and students to discuss research and topics of interest. In 1875, Sir William Osler started the first recorded medical journal club at McGill University. Osler realized the advantages of sharing ideas in a social milieu, and encouraged journal club participants to apply the knowledge they gleaned to relevant patient cases (Kraemer 136-137; Linzer 475-478).

The structure of journal clubs varies from institution to institution, and from profession to profession. However, most tend to meet regularly to discuss research articles and improve their understanding of research design, statistics and critical appraisal methods. Some overlapping goals include developing critical analysis skills, promoting the value of research and scholarship, and networking with peers (Deenadayalan et al. 898-911).

The origin of journal clubs in academic librarianship is unclear. Their usefulness, however is well-demonstrated as a collective effort, enabling librarians to read the literature and apply it accordingly. Unfortunately, library professionals often do not have enough time to discuss issues found in the literature, even if they impact day-to-day operations.

Why is this? Professional staff are often absorbed with other tasks, duties and responsibilities. Moreover, innovative issues are less likely to be disseminated for discussion (Hickman and Allen 642-644). Certainly, some dialogue takes place informally between individuals, but outside of a context in which more individuals could benefit professionally by sharing opinions and experiences. Without such a forum, many new ideas have little chance of succeeding. Professional communication in the workplace therefore, is often not as rigorous as it might be. Staff meetings historically draw a large professional audience, but typically these meetings use a formal reporting structure that does not accommodate a more

relaxed dialogue around related or pertinent topics (Hickman and Allen 642-644). Moreover, staff meetings do not work for big academic libraries that have numerous branch locations on campus.

Library literature does not offer much research on journal clubs. That said, it seems clear that such clubs, whether formal or informal, are not common in academic libraries (Kraemer 136-137; Hickman and Allen 642-644; Pearce-Smith 32-40; Tomlin 1-3). Fortunately, journal clubs are well-covered in the health sciences professional literature (Ebbert, Montori and Schultz 455-461; Goodfellow 107-110; Melchior and Meals 972-976; Sidorov 1193-1197) and were recently the focus of two systematic reviews that examine clubs and their effectiveness as tools for continuing education (Deenadayalan et al. 898-911; Ebbert, Montori and Schultz 455-461). The author of this article felt that starting a journal club at the University of British Columbia (UBC) Library could assist library staff in staying abreast of research in library science.

UBC Library is the third-largest academic library in Canada and consistently ranks among the top university research libraries in North America. UBC Library is spread across the campus and the city of Vancouver and has 21 branches and divisions. Its diverse staff of more than 300 employees includes librarians, support, management and professional staff.

Health sciences research suggests that one characteristic of a successful journal club is the establishment of regular meetings and appropriate times (Deenadayalan et al. 898-911). At UBC, we decided to meet monthly, starting in April 2008. No meetings were held, however, during the busiest and quietest months (when librarians are away for vacations) -- September, January and August. Meeting times are consistent and advertised on the journal club's blog, found at <http://blogs.ubc.ca/journalclub/>.

Health sciences research argues that successful journal clubs require mandatory attendance and a leader to choose papers and guide discussion. The research also suggests circulating papers prior to the meeting (Deenadayalan et al. 898-911; Ebbert, Montori and Schultz 455-461), something we have not easily achieved. The UBC Library journal club is an unofficial venue; it is not affiliated with any library committees. As such, we do not require mandatory attendance. We send a message to all library staff once a month describing the topic, highlighting articles and inviting staff to participate. Meetings are open to all staff; however, the majority of attendees are, indeed, professional librarians.

After a few months, the club was opened to UBC library school students. Attendance typically ranges from 20 to 50 people per session, which we consider high. For some meetings, we also invited other campus stakeholders. For instance, for a meeting about millennial students, we invited service co-ordinators from UBC Student Services; for mobile devices and communication, we invited professionals from the UBC Office of Learning Technology.

There are no topic limitations. For each meeting, we ask a volunteer to facilitate a session that is of a particular interest to her/him. We sometimes feature a panel of presenters interested in a specific area. Meeting participants are asked to read short articles selected prior to the session to initiate discussion. Moreover, facilitators prepare a short executive summary of articles.

Our journal club meetings have covered the following topics: young academic researchers, eBooks, millennial students, the future of the library catalogue (panel of four librarians), selection of library material (panel of four librarians), teaching in an academic library (panel of four librarians), citation measurements (panel of three librarians), mobile technologies and devices in the library (panel of three librarians and three IT professionals), and conference reflections. Since the journal club began in April 2008, it has received numerous requests to collaborate with library committees to discuss issues such as collection advisory interest in the future of the library catalogue, or research and instruction interest in sharing conference reflections.

Summary

The Library journal club is an attempt to gather professional staff for a discussion that goes beyond daily duties. Participants broaden their understanding of issues, peripheral or otherwise, that impact the profession (Hickman and Allen 642-644). For new librarians, the club provides an opportunity to exercise their opinion and become accustomed to the library culture at large. Any opportunity to share ideas and opinions in an open environment builds respect and understanding.

Colleagues regard journal clubs as an opportunity to interact with other librarians and learn informally -- making the club an enjoyable respite from daily, routine work. Meetings are collaborative and constructive, allowing staff to build their knowledge base and apply their skills.

While the UBC Library journal club has been a success to this point, it will be interesting to see if its momentum lasts. Thus far, the signs are encouraging: future dates and collaboration with other large Canadian research libraries are scheduled, and the club shows no signs of slowing down.

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