

Annie Jansen

Summer book club—a collaborative achievement

Using tech, time, and resources to engage students effectively

During summer term, an academic library can be a very quiet place. With fewer students on campus, more online classes, and shorter library hours, there is often a lack of interaction between librarians and students. This is a missed opportunity to engage those students who are on campus.

Penn State University Libraries strongly advocates for collaboration across academic units, as well as the development of student engagement programs. In the current academic plan, under the programmatic area of teaching and learning, goals one and two are directly related to this collaborative and immersive learning environment.

Goal one states, “The Libraries will expand our role as a partner in online and resident education, increasing our capacity to develop and support engaged, critical, and informed learners through multiple forms of instruction.” Supporting strategy for this goal includes strengthening partnerships with teaching faculty.

Goal two, “The Libraries will develop active and immersive learning environments that support and facilitate learning in all disciplines,” is directly supported by exploring emerging educational technologies.¹

John D. Vairo Library at Penn State-Brandywine was already committed to both of these goals, but found a new way to work within our resources to increase our

activity supporting collaboration and student engagement.

At Brandywine, though the circulation desk may often be quiet, July is a busy month for the campus academic centers. The Summer Bridge Programs are opportunities for one-on-one peer tutoring for incoming freshmen and returning students. LAUNCH helps first-year students prepare for English and math courses, and helps build fundamental skills for college success. Boot Camps are offered for returning students who need to brush up on foundational math proficiency before enrolling in credit courses. All Summer Bridge tutoring is noncredit and offered on a flexible schedule. With these students on campus, as well as peer tutors, there had to be a way to get the library involved over the slow summer.

With that idea in mind, the library teamed up with the academic center coordinator for the first inaugural Brandywine Summer Bridge Book Club. Having previously worked together on a project with reluctant readers

Annie Jansen is reference and instruction librarian at Penn State-Brandywine’s John D. Vairo Library, email: jansen@psu.edu

© 2018 Annie Jansen

engagement through audio books, we had access to Kindle Fires with copies of ebooks and audiobooks in several popular titles. Why not try a book club?

This article examines how for one month during summer term, the library collaborated with an existing tutoring program for a new way to engage students in reading and discussing literature. The goal of the program was to engage peer tutors in reading and hope their enjoyment spread to other students who were on campus during the quiet summer term.

Why a book club?

The library had previously collaborated with two instructors to use Kindle Fire tablets in the classroom. Students each picked a book that was downloaded onto a Kindle Fire and chose to either listen to the audiobook version, read the ebook, or read and listen simultaneously.

During the semester, both classes, the two instructors, and two librarians met to have group discussion over lunch. While this was required reading for the students, the instructors and librarians involved in the project agreed how fun it was to see students discuss and engage with a book in a more leisurely atmosphere.

Additionally, research before and during the previous semester's Kindle Fire project reinforced our opinion that students who are not readers often need a hook to get them to engage with a text. Rebecca Dierking, in "Using Nooks to Hook Reluctant Readers," argues that technology is the draw for even reluctant readers, and will increase their reading time at school as well as at home.² During summer term, we had two hooks to draw students in: a weekly meeting, where they could have snacks with their peers, and technology they could take home with them for the length of book club.

Buy-in from students

Our first task was to figure out how to get a group together that would take time during their summer break to actually read a

book. When we realized that the peer tutors involved in the Summer Bridge Program were not only already readers, but were interested in our idea and wanted to put their own spin on it, we knew we'd found the right crowd.

The peer-tutors met as a group to discuss plans for our month-long weekly Bridge Book Club meetings. They decided reading four books in one month was too much, so the plan was set to include a meeting where we talked about why we love reading, and one to talk about books versus movies. The students decided to start book club by reading *Eleanor & Park* by Rainbow Rowell, and finish the month-long club by discussing *Born a Crime* by Trevor Noah. Thus, Brandywine Summer Bridge Book Club was born.

The six peer tutors, all female, were encouraged to read the book club books during their downtime as tutors. Each had her own copy of the book or had checked out a library-owned Kindle Fire with the book downloaded. The hope was that other students in the library for tutoring or summer classes would see the peer-tutors model reading and perhaps get interested in coming to book club meetings for a discussion or two.

Advertising

A professional tutor in the Brandywine Academic Centers was tasked with working with the peer-tutors to create advertisements and posters for book club meetings. Flyers were hung around campus, digital signs were posting, and the peer-tutors encouraged their tutees to attend meetings.

In conjunction with our discussion about why we love reading, a library display table was created with each of the book club member's favorite books. Each member wrote a short blurb about what the book meant to them, which was displayed alongside copies of each book, ready for circulation. The peer-tutors loved this display, saying it reminded them of the "staff picks" tables at bookstores. They were proud to display their favorite books and overall love of reading.

Book club meetings

Book club met four weeks in July, three Friday meetings and one Thursday meeting. Meetings were heavily advertising in the library and included snacks and drinks. We met in a classroom off the academic centers area of the library. The core group for each discussion was the six peer-tutors, the academic centers coordinator, a professional tutor, and the reference and instruction librarian, but a few other students came to one or two meetings, seemingly because of encouragement by peer-tutors.

The peer-tutors, while all female, included students of diverse backgrounds. Two African American sisters, a student originally from India but raised in the United Arab Emirates, a white South African whose family moved to the United States only in the last few years, and two caucasian American students whose financial backgrounds, and therefore college experiences, differed greatly. Two of these students were not Brandywine students, but were home from the much larger University Park campus for summer break and were participating in the peer-tutoring program while working other jobs.

Discussion was always robust, fun, and enlightening. The peer-tutors were not shy about expressing their opinions of the books, or of their childhood experience with reading. Particularly interesting was the meeting discussing why we like reading. Each of the peer-tutors discussed a love for reading since being a small child, either encouraged by parents, teachers, siblings, or all. We discussed limits of what we were allowed to read as children and young adults, with a few of the peer-tutors relating stories of sneaking forbidden books after their parents went to bed, or only reading at a friend's house. Some of the other peer-tutors mentioned that they did not have rules about what they could and could not read, but from a young age had a practice of reading aloud to their parents, instead of parents reading to them. This discussion was particularly interesting and really helped

us, from a pedagogical standpoint, see the relation between enjoyment of reading at a young age and leisure reading as an adult.

The final meeting of Brandywine Summer Bridge Book Club was the last Thursday in July. We discussed *Born a Crime* by Trevor Noah. Discussion was engaged, interesting, and respectful, even as the book brought up some difficult issues of race, religion, gender, and nationality. As the hour meeting wound down, a couple of the peer-tutors mentioned how much they enjoyed these meetings and asked whether there was any chance the club could continue during fall semester. A big win for reading engagement.

Observations

This month-long book club was created mostly for enjoyment. The students, faculty, and staff that were included in the book club agreed that it was one of their favorite parts of the Summer Bridge Program. We also hoped that students in the library might see a group of people for whom reading was not a chore, but something fun and to be looked forward to. We hoped it would become evident that reading has the ability to connect you to others. A few students who were in the Summer Bridge Program not as peer-tutors, but to be tutored, came to meetings. While we definitely made it clear that reading is a fun activity, these students were not as confident, not as willing to speak up about their opinions, and not as engaged with the book or the club. This could be due to feeling a bit like an outsider in a group made up of tutors, a lower reading level, or numerous other factors. Effort was made to make these students feel valuable and welcome, but none came to all four meetings.

Perhaps because of the subject matter of the books, or perhaps because of the diverse backgrounds of the peer-tutors who formed for core book club, discussions always hit on issues that were complicated, and potentially upsetting or worrying. Our students always addressed these issues incredibly well, with respect for their colleagues and differences

in opinion. Because of this, the students, as well as the faculty and staff who participated, came away from each meeting with broader understanding of issues outside the context of their own culture.

An unintended consequence of Brandywine Summer Bridge Book Club was the petition, by students, to start a Brandywine Book Club. One of the peer-tutors went through the steps to register as a student club. More than 30 students expressed interest in joining Brandywine Book Club at the fall engagement fair.

Conclusion

Brandywine Summer Bridge Book Club was meant to fill an engagement gap in academic libraries during what can be a quiet summer term. We used existing programs to reach students who were already on campus, introducing them to offerings the library already had, and working within a limited budget. On a culturally diverse campus as such Brandywine, the book club provided another opportunity for students

to share their cultural perspectives and experiences and to consider points of view different from their own—a significant goal of a liberal arts education. Students did most of the work in choosing books and topics for the book club, creating advertisements, and recruiting nontutors to take part in meetings.

By collaborating with Brandywine Summer Bridge programming, we created an effective and interesting way to increase the library's presence during summer term, and developed a full-fledged book club for Penn State-Brandywine students.

Notes

1. Penn State University Libraries, "Strategic Plan 2014-2019," Penn State University Libraries, accessed December 10, 2017, <https://libraries.psu.edu/about/organization-glance/strategic-plan-2014-2019>.

2. Rebecca Dierking, "Using Nooks to Hook Reluctant Readers," *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 58 no. 5, (2015): 407. *zz*

NEW PUBLICATIONS FROM ACRL

		
978-0-8389-8939-5	978-0-8389-8943-2	978-0-8389-8933-3

All titles are available from the ALA online store:
<http://www.alastore.ala.org/>

Association of College & Research Libraries
50 E. Huron, Chicago IL 60611 | 800.545.2433 | acr@ala.org