

Theodore Hickman and Lisa Allen

A librarian's journal club

A forum for sharing ideas and experiences

Too frequently our library's professional staff fail to take time to discuss, as a group, library and library-related issues that do not necessarily impact their daily routine or the library's day-to-day operation. More commonly, professional staff is absorbed in completing the tasks and assigned duties that fall chiefly within their immediate area of responsibility. Innovative ideas that are peripheral, not part of a current service or not within the scope of the larger group, are less likely to be disseminated for discussion. Certainly dialogue takes place between individuals, by happenstance or on the fly, after a conference or a workshop, but outside of an arena or context in which more individuals can participate and benefit professionally through a sharing of opinions and experiences. Without such a forum, new ideas do not stand a chance. Hence, professional communication is more often not as rigorous or robust as it might be, and should be, in the workplace.

Staff meetings historically provide a venue that draws a large professional audience, but typically these meetings use a formal reporting structure that does not accommodate a more relaxed dialogue or professional discourse around a related or pertinent topic. To address this lament, a suggestion was made at one of our library faculty meetings to take a look at a known, successful format for organizing individuals around a topic for discussion—the "journal club."

A brief history of journal clubs

A review of the literature indicates that journal clubs are common in the sciences

and medicine and are a popular forum for continuing medical education.¹ They provide an opportunity to discuss the latest medical and scientific research and apply it to current practice. Articles are clinical or problem-based in nature and thus are most valuable to members' professional lives. The structure of the club can be formal (such as those found in academic programs) or informal, and members can engage in critiques of the literature, or simply learn from its insights.

Unfortunately, a search of the library literature reveals a dearth of literature on such professional discussion groups, particularly outside medical librarianship, which may indicate that journal clubs, whether formal or informal, are rare or nonexistent in academic libraries. Whether journal clubs are a new idea or one that has simply not been publicized within academic librarianship, it is a collective current awareness tool that has great merit in a library setting. In fact, when one of the authors recently mentioned the journal club to a group of librarians at another academic institution, they were immensely curious as to what a journal club was and how it operated in the context of a library.

A journal club at Rohrbach Library

A fortunate confluence of factors led to the formation of a journal club at Kutztown University's Rohrbach Library. The precursor

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to the journal club was a library salon, comparable to a mini-staff development workshop, where librarians presented what they learned from conferences or professional journals. However, these salons were held infrequently and there was a lack of interaction among the presenter and attendees.

A better idea presented itself in January 2004, when the head of the reference department was driving to work one day and heard a radio show broadcast on National Public Radio (NPR) called “Making science personal through journal clubs.”² She took the idea back to the library faculty, and, after faculty agreed that the journal club concept was worth exploring, a small group was formed to adapt the format to accommodate a library setting. A proposal was developed that outlined the club’s mission (“to gather, to share, to discuss, to problem solve, to learn and grow professionally”) and structure.

Buy-in and easy participation on the part of faculty were high in the consciousness of the organizers. So as not to burden any one individual, volunteers were solicited for the task of selecting and distributing an article, preparing discussion questions, and serving as session moderator. Sessions were to last just one hour so as not to create a hardship on anyone’s schedule, and meetings were to take place once a month. The club kicked off its meetings in April 2004, with a lively discussion of Malcolm Gladwell’s 2002 article “The social life of paper” and its relevance to library culture.³

Of course, attendance is purely voluntary. The individual freedom to select an article on a topic with broad interest, personal professional interest, or related to a current issue seemed to encourage participation. Examples of topics recently explored include bibliotherapy, the future of information literacy, innovative service models in academic libraries, and the future of the library and information science profession. While attendance has never been 100 percent, each session has had sufficient participation to carry on a productive, intelligent discussion.

Value to library faculty

Individual professional development, an opportunity to socialize informally with col-

leagues, and the birth of new service initiatives are extremely valuable to all library staff. First and foremost, journal clubs help with the challenge of “keeping up” with the large amount of literature that is published. This is not only true in the physical and biological sciences, but in library science, as well. Opportunities to interact with colleagues and learn on an informal basis make the journal club a fun, social respite from daily, routine work, often performed in isolation from other units in the library.

Evidence of such benefits can be found in nonlibrary literature. An article in the nursing literature by Susan Klapper,⁴ which explained the “how-to” of creating a journal club, listed the benefits of journal clubs, including informing members of new ideas, strategies, current trends, and issues in the field, as well as facilitating staff decision making and discussion of complex problems. The creators of a journal club for high school biology teachers in Israel described their club meetings as collaborative and constructivist in nature, allowing the teachers to build on their knowledge base in biology and apply what they learned in their own teaching.⁵ Similarly, we have found that new ideas gleaned from a current article in the library literature may indeed lead to new projects that allow us to become even more user-focused in our service offerings.

Challenges, changes, and a positive outcome

Two challenges became apparent as the journal club progressed. While generally well-attended, attendance has decreased since our initial meeting. This may be due in part to busy faculty schedules, particularly as each semester’s end approaches. In addition, lack of interest in moderating has caused the same few librarians to lead multiple discussions, which may lead to moderator burn-out and lack of topics in the pool. More librarian participation means more diversity of topics, as we each monitor different information sources, have different skill sets and professional backgrounds, and have unique perspectives on librarianship, which, if shared, would benefit

the library as a whole. Based on these challenges, the journal club structure and schedule need to be re-evaluated and ways to increase participation need to be addressed, which could lead to an improved journal club.

Although the journal club at Rohrbach Library has only been active for a short time, one positive outcome is about to be realized. A journal club discussion in spring 2004 centered on field librarianship, in which librarians work “out in the field”—in the academic colleges or departments they serve. This preceded the development of a pilot “mobile librarian” program, in which one or two rotating librarians, with technical support, are offering weekly office hours—in the form of a roving term paper clinic—in the university’s social work/criminal justice department in fall 2005. We are optimistic that this initiative is only one of many that could be realized through ongoing discussions in the journal club.

Conclusion

The Rohrbach Library Journal Club is an attempt to gather the professional staff for discourse above and beyond their day-to-day duties. Participants can’t help but broaden their understanding of issues, however peripheral to the task at hand, that will impact the profes-

sion. For new faculty members, it has been a nonthreatening venue in which to exercise their voice and acclimate to the larger library culture. Any opportunity to share ideas and opinions in an open environment builds respect and understanding. To foster further interest in the group, one possibility is to open participation to library staff and other campus professionals with an interest in the library. In any case, it is clear, journal clubs are not just for the sciences and medicine anymore.

Notes

1. Khalid S. Khan and Harry Gee, “A new approach to teaching and learning in journal club,” *Medical Teacher* 21, no. 3 (1999): 289–93.

2. Joe Wright, interview by Robert Siegel, *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, January 21, 2004.

3. Malcolm Gladwell, “The social life of paper,” *The New Yorker* (March 25, 2002): 92–96.

4. Susan J. Klapper, “A tool to educate, critique, and improve practice,” *Association of Operating Room Nurses: AORN Journal* 74, no. 5 (2001): 712–14. Gilat Brill, Hedda Falk, and Anat Yarden, “Teachers’ journal club: Bridging between the dynamics of biological discoveries and biology teachers,” *Journal of Biological Education* 37, no. 4 (2003): 168–70. *ZZ*

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