



EDITORIAL

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Grassroots Inquiry through Reading Groups in Academic Libraries

fostering community across campus

“The kinds of reading groups we are discussing are not book clubs based on fiction, but rather, themed reading groups where members read scholarly texts together.”

This article discusses the way reading groups within academic libraries can foster communities of grassroots inquiry. The kinds of reading groups we are discussing are not book clubs based on fiction, but rather, themed reading groups where members read scholarly texts together. These reading groups are advertised across campus with no requirements for membership beyond an interest in the theme. Reading groups like these allow library staff and faculty to collaborate with researchers from different disciplines and departments; in turn, researchers benefit from joining a community outside of the disciplinary boundaries. When reading groups cohere and form a cohort around shared curiosity, they can foster a sense of kinship based on shared inquiry and interests, promoting collaboration and generosity.

Our reading groups have been most relevant at the initial stage of research where discussing foundational texts with those outside normal departmental boundaries, and across disciplinary borders, opens a researcher to wider understandings than their own. This depth of understanding will, in turn, effect the final research outputs, such as articles or books. The library's role in hosting the reading group can then as a discipline agnostic space that fosters intellectual generosity and true collaboration.

Our argument is both practically and theoretically oriented. We have created multiple reading groups within academic libraries and experienced the way these formed into interdisciplinary or undisciplined communities of inquiry. Past themes of our reading groups include Digital Humanities, Academic Labor, and Critical Theory. In exploring how our reading groups succeeded in bringing together scholars across disciplines, we ventured into the history of reading groups in general and within libraries and theories of reading. In this article, we bring with some of this history and theory to help situate how reading groups are foundationally inclined toward grassroots inquiry, along with practical advice for facilitating your own reading groups.

The Grassroots of Reading Groups

Because reading groups are locations of self-education and informal education, they are rather invisible, existing almost as phenomena. Elizabeth Long (2003) notes in her research on women's book clubs, perhaps the most iconic style of reading group, that such groups “occupied a zone of cultural invisibility” (ix) because they were not of interest to any sub-discipline

of research. They were too quotidian to garner research interest in the traditional academy, but Long argued that “to take reading groups seriously had the potential, like much feminist scholarship, to destabilize received notions in social thought” (x). In much the same way, when taken seriously, reading groups have the potential to destabilize notions of the solitary genius in academia.

Certain kinds of reading groups have been successful precisely because of their veil of invisibility, which allows them to operate within liminal social space. In 1920s Korea, for example, reading groups played a role in the growth of socialism in the country, which could only occur if a communalist ethos was adopted by the general population. The popularity of reading circles fostered this ethos by asking readers to bring their individual interpretations of texts they read alone to the reading community, where conversations introduced readers to the ideas of others. They also offered a “relatively secure communal spaces where members with a similar intellectual capacity could routinely associate within an egalitarian framework of social relations” (Cheon 2014, 79). Reading circles quickly became known as “dangerous organizations” (84) in Korea because they provided a space for intellectual discussions away from state-mandated curriculum, thereby shifting cultural ideology in a bottom-up way. Reading this way had to take place through clandestine outlets, as Cheon noted that “no capitalist society is generous enough to allow its working class to enjoy the leisure activity of reading” (85). Academic libraries can similarly serve as microcosms existing in the liminal space of disciplinarity, both outside of the reward systems of the university, while still integrated in its institutional workings.

Collectivity is a core feature of a successful reading group. Reading is too often described as an individual activity, particularly clichéd in stereotypes of the silent library. As Long (2003) has argued, reading actually can only exist within specific kinds of social infrastructure. “Reading must be taught, and socialization into reading always takes place within specific social relationships,” argued Long (2003, 9), adding that “Reading thus requires... an infrastructure as social base, in much the same way as modern transportation requires a physical infrastructure of highways, airports, and fuel supplies” (10). Libraries, since their inception, have operated within several dimensions of this infrastructure, providing not only the materials to read, but also evaluations on what is good to read, and the space to read within.

Traditional schooling is a very encompassing social infrastructure for reading, given that it is a place where reading is taught, advanced, and where materials to read are readily available. The curriculum itself stipulates what is worth reading, and book nooks and media libraries provide the space. The reading habit is maintained through various techniques that emphasize the dialogic nature of reading, where reading aloud, discussions of literature, book report presentations, oral recitation of literature, and book competitions all create communities of readers. From kindergarten to the graduate seminar class, many courses today exist in a dialogic classroom, grounded in Bakhtinian or Freirean logics (Bowers 2005), in which “talking to learn” as James Britton (1969) argued, is a primary delivery method.

Traditional schooling, while a successful social infrastructure for reading, is not accessible to everyone. Reading groups have thus offered the dialogic and social infrastructure for reading when traditional schooling is unavailable or untenable. Historically, such spaces have provided a incredible opportunities for changing the way knowledge is circulated. Long (2003) tells of “evening gatherings within peasant communities” where “readings from the vernacular Bible... allowed them to reflect on its message without the help

of a priest" (32). Reading together allowed for interpretive authority, which allows for a multiplicity of readings, and a destabilization of an authoritative reading. Gaining literacy disempowers interpretive authority among other transformative effects.

It is no wonder that some have described reading groups as a space of salvation, given that they were sometimes the only space for discussing intellectual matters. Long's (2003) work considers how women used reading groups as a way "out of the narrow round of their domestic concerns" (48). Others, like the diggers on alluvial goldfields who worked "isolated in a maze of gullies and streams" (Trau 2007, 47), similarly found reading groups as a primary source for connection. Not only did reading put them in contact with each other, but importantly, it connected them to the outside world through periodicals and newspapers. These reading groups were never frivolous pursuits based purely on pleasure, but often keys to living a good life in spite of isolated circumstances.

Reading Groups in Libraries

The history of library outreach and programming has overlap with the history of reading groups. Public libraries, in particular, have contributed to the creation of many reading groups; and at the very least, public libraries help(ed) provide materials for community and grassroots groups to read. One can find anecdotes like this from the Director of the Indianapolis Public Library, who expressed that "Since his library opened in 1873" there had been an increase in "literary activity of the city; never before have the number of "reading clubs" and social meetings for the discussion of literary topics been so numerous" (Wiegand 2015, 42). Contemporarily there are many similar notions related to things like the "the Oprah effect" a phenomena that showed immense circulation increase in books mentioned by Oprah's Book Club, and consequently, impacted how public libraries adapted their collection purchases based on the interest patrons had in Oprah's selected titles (228).

Libraries have also served as host sites for reading groups, including sponsoring reading groups centered on niche genres of fiction, romance book clubs (p. 229) and mystery novel clubs (Fister, 2005). In the 1950s, events like National Library Week and partnerships between the American Library Association and publishers set a foundation for book-centered library programming in order to mutually support the book industry and interest in libraries (Preer, 2010). Reading groups remain a popular part of public library programming and outreach; including moves toward virtual reading groups (Brynge, Case, Forsyth, Green, Holke 2015), which have been shown to contribute to members' sense of community (Fister 2005). As Fister's interview study of reading group participants demonstrated, these groups are successful at contributing to their members "'social and intellectual [worlds] at the same time'" (2005, 305). Members share stories about how when a loved one died, or they themselves suffered an illness, their reading groups actually became a central aspect of their social support network, illustrating how reading groups function beyond acts of reading. Librarians have both major and minor roles in all of these groups, acting as facilitators or simply supporting the groups by providing materials and space.

While public libraries have plenty of intersecting history with reading groups, academic libraries have very little to do with the history and current state of reading groups. Naturally, they are part of the broader infrastructure of literacy and reading that are essential, but they have different purposes than building reading community. At the foundations of librarianship's development as a profession, in general, there has long existed a debate about whether or

not books and reading should be essential to any libraries. Libraries were disciplinarily aligned with the social sciences on purpose, as part of professional debates about the purpose of libraries. While Lawrence Powell, a devoted humanist, “argued that ‘books are basic; to librarianship and that to be effective professionals, librarians primarily had to be readers’” (Wiegand 2016, 120). Jessa Shera notably pushed for “librarianship to form links with an evolving scientific community” (120). Shera’s drive for the library “science” emphasis in the professionalization of libraries is more similar to the foundations of libraries as institution, which are products of the Enlightenment (Bivens-Tatum 2011).

In accordance with this emphasis on information science, academic libraries do not serve a community of readers so much as researchers. In addition, reading groups are often considered part of recreational reading, rather than a research activity. Wiener (1982) noted that librarianship has considered “recreational reading as an altogether superfluous function of the academic library” (64). Julie Elliott (2007; 2009) has written about how academic libraries do little to promote “extracurricular reading,” due to many reasons, including that promoting reading activities “might detract from the image of the librarian as information specialist and might ally academic librarians too closely to their public library counterparts” (2007, 39). Even in the 1980s, Wiener’s survey of academic library support of recreational reading revealed that an emphasis on reading would disrupt the trajectory academic libraries were after. He writes that “when libraries are straining to contain the information explosion, when information itself is identified with the computer and the electronic display terminal, is mistaken for knowledge and substituted for experience,” it would be strange to many to devote budget money to supporting the reading interests of patrons (59).

As Wiener’s commentary suggests, the activities and programs that academic librarians promote link closely to the field’s professional identity. Thus, it makes sense that the field that self-consciously worries about being mistaken as romantic, nostalgic, out of touch, and acritical would wish to direct more energy toward the future of information rather than the supposed anachronism of reading. Looking at the past 30 years of conference themes for Academic, College, and Research Libraries (ACRL) conferences, titles like “Choosing our Future” (1997); “Racing Toward Tomorrow” (2001); “Currents and Convergence: Navigating the Rivers of Change” (2005); “Sailing into the Future—Charting our Destiny” (2007); “Imagine, Innovate, Inspire” (2013); “At the Helm” (2017); and “Ascending into an Open Future” (2021) imply that the field is preparing for a radically changing future with fewer books.

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One theme that stands out from the scholarship is that there is a firm boundary around the concept that reading with others in a library context is automatically a recreational activity. It is difficult to find a nuanced discussion of reading with others as a necessary aspect of research within academic library literature. This is partially due to what Long (2003) calls the “the ideology of the solitary reader,” which “suppresses recognition of the infrastructure of literacy and the social of institutional determinants of what is available to read, what is ‘worth reading,’ and how to read it” (11). Additionally, this perception is compounded by the notion that writing—the product we produce from our research—is also individualized: “the image of the solitary scribbler ... suppresses the social aspects of writing: reading other writers, discussing ideas

with other people, and writing to and for others in the language whose very grammar, genres, and figures of speech encode collectivity” (2). In general, both the ideology of the solitary reader and scribbler prop up individualistic notions of success within academia. When we do not recognize the collective nature of how all knowledge is created, we enact “the archetypical neoliberal subject,” who “is the entrepreneurial individual whose only relationship to other people is competitive self-enhancement” (The Care Collective 2020, 4). The solitary genius is a harmful notion for both the modern university and the modern academic library.

Along with this notion, there is also a sense that in leading the campus in information and data literacy, digital or computational advancement, can only come in lieu of reading. While this is certainly not true on the microscopic level of individual libraries—almost all academic libraries do promote reading in some way—it seems true on a broad professional level. We assume that this attitude is in-part due to the belief that the concept of reading together is conducted through the ubiquitous seminar classroom. In all cases, academics have opportunities to read with other academics simply by participating in the academy. If we support what academics do for a living—research—then we automatically support reading. And yet, we are less likely to support reading explicitly in groups, though that is also something academics do for a living through the dialogic processes of writing, reviewing, presenting, and naturally, reading.

Transformative Potential of Reading Groups

While academics have the opportunity to read together in many contexts, it is the opportunity to read together in a different context that keeps academics interested in reading groups. In many academic spaces, texts are discussed as a community, but not for the sake of collective interpretation, but rather for competition over the most correct interpretation as a kind of moral high ground (Kaserman and Willson, 2009, 27). While conversation based on the required reading is largely the main activity within the seminar classroom, Kaserman and Wilson (2009) argue that it often functions as a place for a monologue with an audience, “a space for the embodiment of individualized claims of knowledge” (28). They note that many academic spaces are plagued by a false sense of interest in dialogue, where a question to another is not authentic inquiry, but rather “the deceptive ‘socratease’, ‘the asking of friendly questions, which show holes in a person’s ideas’” (28). An interdisciplinary reading group offers an alternative to this type of dialogic in that the goal is not critique, but instead a method of gaining new insights and a broader understanding of a text.

To explain more, most academic readers are trained in the art of critique and taught to read in order to be suspicious of the writer. Paul Ricoeur famously called this phenomenon the hermeneutics of suspicion. While this stance prepares readers for the critical frameworks necessary for academic argument and interpretive production, it can also overwhelm the act of reading with a kind of paranoia (Sedgwick 2002). Bruno Latour (2004) has explained that this suspicious mode of reading has gone so far as to push the art of critique into blatant conspiracy theory (229). Such an ethos does not merely impact private reading, but naturally overtakes the reading community. Kaserman and Wilson (2009) state that “a common tactic of textual critique is citing weakness,” but since the author of the text is not typically present in the room, “the bodily impacts of trashing are obscured” (29). The impact is not obscured, however, when the members of the seminar community begin trashing other interpretations made by others in the room. Trashing, they say, is “easier than caring critique and careful listening” (29).

This is the default hermeneutics of many academic reading communities (and conferences, etc.), and ultimately it manifests as an actual atmosphere in a given space. Heidegger argued that “experiences of mood, or of certain moods, are ontologically revelatory” (Stolorow 2014, 6) meaning that the affects and feelings of people, their approaches to texts or the world, can be felt by others. As Felski noted, “Whether our overall mood is ironic or irenic, generous or guarded, strenuous or languorous, will influence how we position ourselves in relation to the texts we encounter and what strikes us as most salient” (2015, 21). Strangely, how the readers approach a text often stipulates the very ontological—tangible, physical, experiential—state of the space we are in. This concept is precisely why reading in different contexts that may have different norms than the traditions in the academy can literally revitalize an academic’s experience of reading in community. Carlson and Walker (2018) argue for academic reading group that enact radical care, wherein being “attentive to different things that we open up space for ‘other possibilities’” (786). Their reading group was different because it did not “rush to conclusions to justify time spent” (786), avoiding the “hurried scholarship of profit-oriented universities” (787).

Reading Groups as Academic Communities

While at the University of Georgia, we sought to create a different space and foster a different community of reading based on these notions of inquiry, our first reading groups within an academic library were focused on Digital Humanities (DH), which is inherently interdisciplinary and broad enough to disperse expertise throughout our discussions. We created a Faculty Learning Community (FLC) through our campus Center for Teaching and Learning that was centered on Critical DH. Our group included eight faculty members from five different departments, each with varying degrees of familiarity with DH. With a diverse group, each of whom had different perspectives and expertise, in the neutral location of the Digital Humanities Lab within the Main Library, we could shed the politics of the university and the needs of individual departments in favor of reading communally. On equal footing, we were able to talk openly and deeply about the central issues in DH, data, preservation, and labor.

We used a similar format to establish a second reading group with seven graduate student members. We wanted all participants to exist on a level playing field given that graduate students are asked to read infinitely, but normally under the rigors and competition of their department and their degree requirements. In the space of a reading group, these students could feel free to breathe and know they are there to find a generous, supportive cohort and to exchange knowledge outside typical academic purview, rather than to obtain a grade or meet a requirement. Our reading list was similar to that in the FLC, though with a special attention to graduate student labor on DH projects. Without university level incentive or credit, we retained the reading group all year with nothing to offer but a collaborative environment and a few snacks.

Given the success of these groups and the hunger for this kind of intellectual space, we have each gone on to start reading groups separately at new institutions toward our thematic interests at a given time. In general our calls for members are completely open, and texts are selected for broad appeal and to be deployed differently across disciplines. In this environment, complexity is welcome, as we can all offer our own interpretations rooted in our disciplinary training. These groups seek to skirt siloed boundaries that estrange students from each other at many R1 universities.

Conclusion

There is no guaranteed way to create a reading group that finds success, i.e. a group with common interests and that has a strong, participatory membership. Much of the success of the group is dependent on the location, the participants, the theme, and so forth. There are, however, a few guiding principles that can help form a reading group like the ones we have experienced and described here, which might reduce frustration of group members and keep the purpose of the group in focus.

Explicit Roles: Reading groups require organization and facilitation. The person(s) who organize the group will need to send calendar invites to participants and prepare the readings. They need to create recruitment materials or send invites if the group is invitation-only. They need to look at schedules and make sure the group meets at a reasonable time for everyone. They need to return emails.

The facilitator(s) of the group need to lead the discussion. It is not a good idea to go into a reading group meeting without an explicit leader. While we understand the importance of democratic leadership, a conversation facilitator is essential for helping guide the discussion, preparing questions to draw out participation, directing participants to significant aspects of the text, and sometimes, providing background knowledge to the text (this requires research in advance). If someone talks over people or provides negative criticism to members, the facilitator can mediate the situation.

Careful Planning: It is good for reading groups to be flexible, but it is bad for them to be haphazard and undetermined. The readings for the group should be planned in advance, by way of facilitator selection or group selection. The meeting location should be stable and reserved (or linked in advance, if virtual). Make sure the volume of reading is reasonable for the group members.

Accessible Texts: Provide the texts for the readers, when possible. If this is articles, the task is easy. Sometimes this requires making pdfs of excerpts for larger texts. Place digital copies in a location that members can easily access, such as a Dropbox or a learning management system. Place the readings behind a password that is shared with members, as not to violate any copyright regulations by putting something freely online.

Accommodating Locations & Plans: Reading groups can be held on campus or off campus, but one thing we liked to do was build the reading group into the workday, where people could plan to take part as part of their normal daily life on campus. Still, survey the group to find collective times to meet. Consider inviting the members to bring children or anyone else for whom they may need to care for during their day. Circumstances with COVID-19 extended our ideas about accommodations, as well. Consider a virtual group so that mobility, chronic illness, and risk of infection is a non-issue.

We have experienced reading groups that were joyful and reparative, created interpretation collectively, avoided competition, and seemed to actually renew members. We believe that the academic library is a disciplinary agnostic space was one of the reasons we saw such success, given that libraries can sometimes maneuver around and through the logic of the neoliberal university and attract researchers from across the curriculum who are hungry for the kind of interdisciplinary discussion that is lacking in quotidian academic experience. These researchers are searching for a deep engagement with the content without looking for holes in the argument. Hearing disparate perspectives from fellow academics allows for a respectful conversation that may reveal perspectives that were unseen or unrecognized within a particular discipline. The encouragement of this kind of intellectual exchange breaks down the imagined divide between STEM and the Humanities, social and hard sciences, and specialization that is

avored over collaboration. Reading groups have the potential to reorganize research and restructure the way we think of learning and researching as a whole.

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