

Pennsylvania Libraries: *Research & Practice*

Practice

PaLA Virtual Journal Club

Providing Opportunities for Reflection, Improvement, and Connections

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A journal club is one means for those in similar professions or practices to read, discuss, and keep up with professional literature with colleagues. Journal clubs are most frequently associated with the medical professions; however, many professionals, including librarians, can benefit from the reading of research and the subsequent discussions and camaraderie that a journal club can elicit. This article describes the launch of a statewide virtual journal club for librarians in Pennsylvania. Now in its third series, the Pennsylvania Library Association (PaLA) College & Research Division (CRD) journal club has given those who've participated the opportunity to designate time for professional reading, reflect on personal practice, discuss and exchange theoretical and practical ideas, and connect with librarians across the state.

Literature Review

Background

Journal clubs, sometimes referred to as reading groups, provide opportunities to read and discuss the professional literature with colleagues. Canadian physician Sir William Osler is credited with founding the first journal club, at McGill University in Montreal in 1875, as a way to keep up with the medical literature and to share the cost of and access to expensive professional journals (Linzer, 1987). Other universities and community hospitals adopted the concept of journal clubs and they spread throughout the medical professions over the course of the 20th century. While journal clubs are common in the health sciences, they appear to be significantly less common in other professions, including librarianship. Even within libraries, journal clubs seem to be more prevalent in health sciences libraries than in other settings (Young & Vilelle, 2011).

Journal Clubs in Libraries

Some literature describes journal clubs that partner with or include librarians, but these are generally health sciences journal clubs that include the medical librarians who work with their students, faculty, and/or clinicians (Diaz & Walsh, 2018; Sortedahl, Wical, & Benike, 2018). As Park and Nephin (2016) point out, there is not much in the library literature about journal clubs specifically for and by librarians, although there are several blog posts that do describe library journal clubs. One of the earliest library journal clubs documented in the literature is the group Hickman and Allen (2005) described: a librarian heard a story on National Public Radio about journal clubs in the medical professions, was inspired, proposed the idea to colleagues, wrote a mission statement, and started a journal club which met in person at Kutztown University's Rorhbach Library.

In-person and Online Models

Most of the library journal clubs described in the literature meet in person and are often limited to one institution (Barsky, 2009; Fitzgibbons, 2015; Kraemer, 2007; Park & Nephin, 2016; Pearce-Smith, 2006; Roper, Brbre, & Fairclough, 2016; Webber et al., 2017). There are certainly advantages to designating time to meet with colleagues face-to-face for a professional conversation about the literature in the field. However, the in-person model is only one way to run a journal club. Sortedahl, Wical, and Benike (2018) describe a partnership between team members from the library, nursing faculty, and the continuing education (CE) program to facilitate an online journal club for nurses for which they could earn CE credits. Using video conferencing software, the group met once a month for an hour to have a real-time discussion about an article, including a presentation from the article's author. After the author left the meeting, the participating nurses used checklists to critically appraise the article, affording them a chance to not only keep up with the professional literature, but also to practice their evaluative skills.

Meeting over video conferencing platforms allows for real-time conversations, and some of the literature on journal clubs notes that synchronous conversations generally have more momentum than asynchronous conversations (Chan et al., 2015; Chelten et al., 2017). However, one of the challenges of having a virtual journal club meet in real time is scheduling, especially for national or international journal clubs that may reach across multiple time zones. Asynchronous virtual formats allow participants to join the conversation when it is convenient for them (Chelten et al., 2017). Chan et al. (2015) provide an example of an asynchronous online journal club for physicians that uses Twitter as a platform, where participants communicate by tagging a Twitter account and deploying hashtags. Devabhakthuni, Reed, and Watson (2016) describe an assignment for second-year nursing students that asked them to work in groups to prepare presentations on an article and then discuss it with participants via Blackboard Collaborate. Other asynchronous online journal clubs may exist as blog posts and comments. It is also possible to use a hybrid model, as Chelten et al. (2017) point out. Dalton (2014) describes an example of a hybrid model in the Information Literacy Journal Club, which uses the Blogger platform. The facilitator writes a blog post about the selected article, and then a real-time discussion is held via the comments section of the blog during a designated one-hour time slot.

Recommended Practices

Regardless of the mode of delivery, there are several recommended practices described in the literature, although they are sometimes contradictory. Some authors recommend having one trained leader serve to select articles and facilitate discussions (Chelten et al., 2017; Sortedahl, Wical, & Benike, 2018), while others recommend rotating these responsibilities among all members of the group or a select group of journal club leaders (Barsky, 2009; Park & Nephin, 2016; Pearce-Smith, 2006; Roper, Brbre, & Fairclough, 2016). Several articles suggest inviting the authors whose work the journal club will discuss (Chan et al., 2015; Park & Nephin, 2016; Sortedahl, Wical, & Benike, 2018). Likewise, there are recommendations that journal clubs should maintain a web page with links to articles and notes on

discussions (Chelten et al., 2017; Kraemer, 2007; Sortedahl, Wical, & Benike, 2018) or record discussions in some other manner to facilitate future reference (Roper, Brbre, & Fairclough, 2016; Young & Vilelle, 2011).

Challenges

Finding time and managing scheduling conflicts are frequently cited as barriers to maintaining a journal club, and it seems that sustaining membership is one of the biggest challenges journal clubs face (Hickman & Allen, 2005; Fitzgibbons, 2015; Young & Vilelle, 2011). Sortedahl, Wical, and Benike (2018) found that offering CE credits was a valuable motivator for their group. Chelten et al. (2017) suggest that making attendance mandatory is an effective way to sustain participation, but this strategy may not work for all journal clubs. Fitzgibbons (2015) offers a potential alternative that is based, instead, on enthusiasm and commitment: “Regardless of the model, it is important to the success of the journal club to have several core members whose dedication can sustain the group” (p. 32).

Value of Participation

As Fitzgibbons, Kloda, and Miller-Nesbit (2017a) recently pointed out, there is a dearth of literature assessing the effectiveness of librarians’ participation in journal clubs. There are several qualitative studies, though, that suggest an array of benefits to participants and suggest that some of the challenges of sustaining journal clubs can also be benefits. Library journal club participants seem to most frequently cite dedicating time to stay current with the literature as a benefit (Fitzgibbons, Kloda, & Miller-Nesbit, 2017a; Park & Nephin, 2016; Roper, Brbre, & Fairclough, 2016; Young & Vilelle, 2011). Young and Vilelle (2011) also note that journal clubs help participants identify gaps in the literature, which could be especially valuable for those librarians who are seeking out their own research area. Although not all journal clubs focus on critically appraising the articles they read, another commonly cited benefit is the opportunity to practice and apply critical appraisal skills (Fitzgibbons, Kloda, & Miller-Nesbit, 2017a; Roper, Brbre, & Fairclough, 2016; Young & Vilelle, 2011). While these benefits are important, it is also important to note that library journal club participants value connecting with colleagues to discuss issues in the field (Fitzgibbons, Kloda, & Miller-Nesbit, 2017a; Pearce-Smith, 2006; Sortedahl, Wical, & Benike, 2018; Webber et al., 2017; Young & Vilelle, 2011). In fact, Young and Vilelle found that “Personal interaction is frequently cited as one of the most valuable parts of journal clubs, and that is particularly true where librarians from different institutions come together for discussion” (p. 131).

Adding Value for our Members

The Pennsylvania Library Association (PaLA) College & Research Division (CRD) consists of academic librarians from around the state. Monthly, the approximately 20 board members meet to discuss workshop and conference planning, awarding Library Service and Technology Act (LSTA) grant money, membership, and various new and ongoing initiatives that provide value and professional development to our membership of approximately 200 librarians from across the state. An ongoing Connect & Communicate Series (C&CS) that was initially launched in 2012 had both grown its offerings of online workshops and was seeing increased participation. In light of that success, in the early spring of 2018, CRD discussed increasing virtual opportunities for members, including piloting a virtual journal club. The board members agreed that a virtual journal club was worth considering as the benefits of participation, namely spending more time on professional reading, reflecting on our own practice, and connecting with other librarians, were professional outcomes we universally valued and assumed our statewide colleagues did as well.

Planning and Running a Virtual Journal Club

Three PaLA College and Research Division Board members volunteered to spearhead this initiative. We met almost immediately and decided a pilot was the best course of action. Running the club first as a pilot program allowed us to work out the logistics of planning and developing a virtual journal club and to determine if this was indeed something in which CRD members would want to participate. As none of us had much experience with journal clubs, we quickly realized that we would need to do some research if we were to be successful. One of us began researching virtual journal clubs to determine a list of best practices and discussion questions. Another was tasked with determining the digital logistics of creating synchronous meetings for librarians from around the state. And the third began developing the surveys that would be used to facilitate participant sign-up and feedback.

Documentation, instructions, examples and advice from several organizations were incredibly useful for helping us develop many aspects of our virtual journal club. We learned much from the online resources made available by the Library Journal Club Network (Fitzgibbons, Kloda, & Miller-Nesbit, 2017b), the Society for Academic Continuing Medical Education Virtual Journal Club (2017), the American College of Clinical Pharmacology Virtual Journal Club (2019), and a Journal Club How-To Guide from the Oncology Nursing Society (2010). After reviewing these resources and discussing the unique aspects of our own journal club, we determined that we would run our pilot as a three-part series that would meet once a month in the summer of 2018, and, if successful, could continue seasonally. We also decided to have the pilot focus on a theme, with each meeting in the series focused on a different aspect of one topic, rather than a new topic each meeting. We hoped this would allow members to feel like they could join any series and at any time in a series. In addition, we hoped this deep-dive into one topic would allow journal club participants to explore several different aspects of a topic. Other decisions made with the intent to encourage participation included scheduling meetings over or around the lunch hour, using video conferencing to allow participants to more easily interact, and selecting only open access articles. We chose Zoom for video conferencing as multiple facilitators had institutional access, participants could easily access the meeting via a link on nearly any device with internet access, and it allowed for screen sharing, small breakout groups and large-group discussion.

After an initial marketing email distributed to CRD members and advertised on Facebook and CRD's blog, 33 librarians registered for the virtual journal club summer pilot series. During registration, they were asked to select or suggest topics they would be interested in discussing in the first three-month series. A wide range of potential topics were considered including student information seeking strategies, critical librarianship, library as place, working with special populations, embedded librarianship, transition from high school to college, and universal design for learning in libraries. The survey showed that most participants were interested in student information seeking strategies. We considered the types of librarians who had registered and selected articles that would appeal or potentially be applicable to librarians working in public, academic, or special libraries. We kept the criteria for article selection broad. Articles simply needed to discuss student information seeking strategies, be interesting and applicable to a wide variety of librarians working in many different settings, and be open access. For example, while the initial articles chosen for the summer pilot all focused on student-information seeking strategies, one article focused on how students conducted everyday life research rather than research for school projects or papers, while another looked at the search behaviors of the millennial generation as a whole, not just college or university students.

We brainstormed and drafted discussion questions to encourage and guide the conversation around each article. Discussion questions were sent out in advance so that participants would both know what to expect and be prepared to join in the conversations. The discussion questions were general enough to apply to every article during the series and also allow every member an opportunity to contribute to the conversation based on their own backgrounds and experiences. The following discussion questions were used for each meeting:

- Do the conclusions accurately reflect the analyses? Where might you have drawn different conclusions?
- Where can you relate to the articles? Where have you had different experiences?

- Describe, where applicable, how the information gained from the studies could be used in your practice and in your environment?
- What additional questions or concerns about do you have?

We hoped that these questions would allow for discussions that would be a mix of both considering the practical nature of librarianship while also giving all participants the opportunity to practice critically evaluating and analyzing articles.

Approximately 3 weeks before each meeting, we sent an email to all registered club members with specifics for joining and participating in the meeting, including a link to the first open access article for discussion, a link to the online Zoom meeting, and the discussion questions.

Each hour-long journal club meeting was divided into an introduction, small group discussion, and large group discussion. During the 10-minute introduction, club facilitators introduced themselves, explained the logistics of the meeting such as how the breakout rooms for small group discussions would work, covered tips for effective online meetings and discussion, and provided context for the chosen article. A presentation created with Google slides and shared with participants using the share screen feature on Zoom guided the conversation (Figure 1). One facilitator was designated to manage the logistics of Zoom.

Contribute Actively to the Discussion by

- Sharing your experiences related to the topic of the article.
- Sharing how recommendations, findings, and/or conclusions may apply to your setting.
- Asking questions.
- Expressing your agreement of others' contribution.
- Clarifying, summarizing, and synthesizing information.
- If you prefer to only listen in to the live conversation, consider sharing your thoughts later through the collaborative note-taking Google doc.

Oncology Nursing Society Journal Club How-to Guide
<https://www.ons.org/sites/default/files/Journal%20Club%20Toolkit.pdf>

Figure 1

A slide of best practices for participating in a journal club discussion.

Following the introduction, attendees were divided into small groups of typically 3 or 4 people using Zoom's breakout room function. We allowed Zoom to assign the participants to random groups. The designated moderator visited each group to ensure there were no problems and to answer any questions. Attendees were encouraged to discuss the provided questions in their small group and take notes in a shared Google document. After 15-20 minutes of discussion in the small groups, the moderator brought the attendees back together in the large group to share the highlights of their small group discussion. Some meetings followed a structured format in which each small group's

designee reported the communal thoughts on each question, while other meetings were more free-ranging, in which participants spoke freely and veered widely from the prepared discussion questions.

Assessment

After each session in the series, participants had an opportunity to share their feedback about the journal club pilot via a survey created with Google Forms and distributed via email. Feedback from the first session in the pilot was generally positive about the logistics of the journal club, although several members indicated that more time in small groups would be desirable. As a result, we increased small group discussion from fifteen to twenty minutes for the following sessions. Several participants expressed a desire for more members to use their camera. While we encouraged that in subsequent meetings, we emphasized that this was optional, as there may have been many reasons why a participant may have chosen not to, including lack of a camera, or wanting privacy if eating or pumping. Overall, participants indicated that they enjoyed both individual meetings and the series as a whole. The free-text responses revealed that several participants especially valued the opportunity to both dedicate time to professional reading and also to discuss articles with other librarians from across the state, who they may not have met before. Some participants did reiterate their desire to have as many people as possible use their camera, while others expressed a wish that all articles discussed in a series would be recently published.

After each session, we met to do some immediate assessment and to debrief and take notes in our planning document on what could be improved. Some concerned the logistics of Zoom. We quickly learned during the first meeting that the breakout room option is only available if the Zoom organizer is logged in. But it wasn't until after the first session that we discovered that Zoom had the option of reassigning an individual to a different group, which may be necessary if two of the three facilitators ended up in the same small group. We also discussed strategies for encouraging discussion in the large group. We decided that at subsequent meetings we would emphasize that each small group should designate a note-taker so that there is both a point person and notes to work from when reconvening in large group discussion time so that the discussion flows. We also felt that while a point person was helpful, stressing that everyone was welcome to talk in large group discussion time was important. Anecdotal feedback given at the monthly PaLA CRD board meeting from a few board members who participated in the journal club was overwhelmingly positive. At the end of the series, the chair even noted that she recognized some librarians in person at the annual conference because she had met them virtually during the journal club.

Based on the positive feedback from participants and the general success of the summer pilot, club facilitators decided to offer a second series in the fall focused on assessment. Facilitators did consider attendance as a factor in both assessing the pilot and scheduling future series. Of the 33 librarians that signed up for the pilot, approximately two-thirds or fewer attended as the series went on. We were concerned that running a series during the fall semester might result in lower attendance since academic librarians, who made up the majority of our members in the summer, tend to be very busy in the fall semester. We decided to proceed with the club, however, since one of the goals of a journal club was to encourage librarians to carve time out of their busy schedules for professional reading and development. In addition, it would have been unwise to make assumptions about interest or attendance without having actual data. Ultimately, twenty people registered for the fall series; however, less than half generally attended the meetings. This seems to show that librarians were interested in the journal club but timing or other demands may have been a barrier to participation. As the numbers fluctuated for each session, we adjusted discussion time and structure accordingly. For example, at our final session in the fall series, the seven librarians who were participating agreed it would be best to abandon the small group and instead all discuss the article together. We continued to collect ongoing feedback which remained positive and our spring series, focusing on the topic of library as place, is currently underway.

Going Forward

Future opportunities for the CRD virtual journal club focus on addressing the primary challenge faced by other clubs and shared in the literature which is sustaining a robust, diverse, and engaged membership. As the journal club moves into its second year, we are exploring strategies for increasing and diversifying our membership and investigating methods for keeping the club's format and content fresh and relevant. To diversify our membership, we are exploring strategies such as reaching out to library school students and directly marketing to non-academic librarians. To keep our meetings relevant and engaging, we are considering ideas used by other clubs like inviting article authors to attend a portion of the club meeting in which their article is discussed and encouraging journal club participants to volunteer to facilitate meetings. We also plan to develop a page on the CRD website to keep current and potential members up-to-date on upcoming meeting dates and provide links to meeting registration, articles, and discussion notes.

Journal clubs are one means of connecting librarian colleagues via discussion and analysis of professional literature. Modern digital tools like Zoom allow for an easy convening of a synchronous virtual journal club that can produce robust conversations around theory, practice, and shifting ideas within librarianship, regardless of the type of library that participants may work in. Facilitating one for librarians in Pennsylvania is one means for PaLA CRD to engage our members, develop professional relationships, exchange ideas, and ultimately build community among library professionals in our state.

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