

Talking Among Ourselves

Using a Book Club as an Inclusive Leadership Tool

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Introduction: Inclusive Leadership and Cultural Humility

Libraries are often seen as progressive strongholds in the current culture wars, but our institutions are not truly free from racism and bias, either historically or at present. In fact, librarianship is still very much a white-majority profession.¹ Libraries, like most workplaces, “were not built *by* or *for* all kinds of identities, but rather for those who originally built the modern workplace and still dominate its leadership ranks.”²

But as service-centered organizations, libraries bring in a wide range of people in various states of need. We must be prepared to accommodate everyone. Are we providing equitable assistance to every member of our communities? Are we also considering the unique background of each patron? And lastly, asking how that background might impact their experience of our services.

In order for libraries to be more inclusive, equitable, and anti-racist spaces, it is incumbent upon us as leaders to light the way. This effort requires a dedication to inclusivity that lets us see power imbalance and recognize the ways in which we can use our own power to leverage change. In addition, we library leaders must reflect upon our own positions while recognizing the ways in which power influences every interaction.

In her book on inclusive leadership, Jennifer Brown describes the Inclusive Leader Continuum, which helps leaders identify their place on their diversity learning journey in four steps: unaware, aware, active, and advocate.³ Many leaders begin in the unaware stage, where they are growing aware of challenges that other people face, but they feel that diversity compliance is someone else’s problem. In the second stage, aware, people learn about their own privilege and realize that they do have a part to play in leveling the playing field for others. In the active stage, leaders are willing to show vulnerability and begin to use their voices to lead and participate in difficult conversations with their teams in the interest of learning and improving. Finally, in the advocate stage, leaders utilize their power to lead change, consistently confronting inequality to dismantle systemic discrimination. When we finally uncover our biases and prejudices, we can dig deeper and recognize the ways in which our actions perpetuate inequality. Applying this continuum to our work pushes us to understand that no strategy to address systemic racism can be successful if it is not connected to the leaders who have power and influence.

As inclusive leaders seek to change inequitable systems, it's also important to apply humility to our practices and to be open to failing forward. As Brown describes, the practice of humility includes “a willingness to accept new ideas, information, and perspectives—even if they contradict our own views or expose our imperfections.” Specifically, cultural humility is a valuable practice that leads us to realize that our perspectives are not the only way to see and experience the world; it is an ongoing practice in which we commit to learn from others and redress power imbalances. As noted by Hurley, Kostecky, and Townsend in their research on cultural humility, “Being able to see other perspectives helps prevent incorrect assumptions from interfering in your interactions.”⁴

An important way that librarians and library staff themselves can begin dismantling power inequity is through the practice of such cultural humility, led by their leaders in the workplace. Cultural humility creates a more inclusive and helpful environment for patrons and library staff alike. Practicing cultural humility is difficult for most of us because it requires that we decenter our personal perspectives and “set aside defensiveness, to engage in critical self-reflection, and to recognize and use whatever power we have as individuals to overcome structural inequities and redress power imbalances.”

A key step in leading change is to “develop empathy for the lived realities of people from different identity groups and feel motivated to get involved in the change effort.”⁵ To absorb new perspectives and combat the echo chambers in which many of us live, it is helpful to consume a variety of media outside of our usual choices. This includes podcasts, TV shows, books, and more. To this end, I maintain that one way to begin to explore different perspectives and establish these vital yet difficult culturally humble practices is through a diversity book club for staff that includes library leaders, in which we can inspect and reflect upon different perspectives together.

Background on Book Clubs

There has been a lot of research conducted on book clubs and reading groups. Most often, book clubs are conducted in social settings, but for our purposes, we'll be considering reading groups held in professional settings with the aim of expanding participants' cultural competence and humility. Book clubs are especially well-suited for this use because they provide an informal and safe space for conversational learning and critical inquiry that can be focused on social change. In addition, book clubs can foster community for participants in a setting that often dismantles institutional hierarchy, and they have the added benefit of being a low-cost professional development opportunity.

Workplace Learning

Lifelong learning tends to be part and parcel of being a librarian, not only because many of us are naturally curious people, but also because we are regularly exposed to new information as we are

helping patrons, conducting research, teaching classes, or selecting books. Just as important as learning on our own is the idea of building knowledge alongside colleagues, be they librarians or staff members working in libraries. Studies have shown that workplace learning provides significant benefits to organizations, including better service to clients, increased productivity, higher morale, and improved work climate.⁶ But conventional staff training sessions and workshops are not always the most effective vehicle for team learning. Research into workplace learning demonstrates that informal learning approaches, in fact, can provide more valuable learning experiences for participants.⁷ Informal learning, or non-formal learning, is an opportunity provided outside of a traditional teaching environment and, per Grenier et al., “is characterized as voluntary participation for personal enrichment with social processes such as group discussion and exploration.”⁸ Non-formal education provides advantages in that it is flexible and adaptable, and it can meet the learning styles of a wide range of people in a generally enjoyable format, but it may require more enthusiastic leadership than traditional training since it often requires creative efforts to get it rolling. In addition, because it’s voluntary, leadership needs to keep it relevant and compelling in order to get participants to keep coming back for more.⁹

Benefits of Book Clubs

Book clubs can be powerful vehicles for the introduction and discussion of sensitive or controversial topics; in fact, numerous articles and studies reveal that book clubs provide a uniquely supportive arena for participants to engage with, explore, discuss, and appreciate other cultures and other perspectives.¹⁰ In particular, a number of authors discuss the ways in which group reading can contribute to empathy and reduce bias, thereby expanding the capacity of readers to understand and be open to people different from themselves.¹¹ As Davis notes, “Empathetic reading is an overlooked ingredient in the development of anti-racist political sensibilities.”¹² She goes on to state that “sympathetic reading experiences can play an important role in a larger chain of events that provoke critical thinking about racism and enable a shift in political perspective.”¹³ As has been argued in a number of articles,¹⁴ this increased awareness of positionality and cultural inequalities may prompt the growth of a political consciousness in readers and can inspire “students and others to engage in those struggles that further possibilities for living in a more just society.”¹⁵

Critical inquiry calls on individuals to evaluate information from multiple perspectives in order to create new understanding. Research has shown that participation in book clubs can build the critical thinking skills necessary to undertake critical inquiry. Book clubs also lead to critical reflection,¹⁶ which helps professionals “be better prepared to deal with the diverse range of students, clients, or patients that they will encounter throughout their careers.”¹⁷ Related to critical inquiry is the concept of conversational learning, wherein “understanding is achieved through the interplay of opposites and contradictions.”¹⁸ In dialogue, participants create new pathways of understanding as they interact with each other and challenge their own perspectives. I argue that this process of conversational learning is distinct from critical inquiry in that conversational learning cannot be done solo, whereas critical inquiry can be.

“Talk is one of the ways through which human beings make meaning.”¹⁹ As one might expect, the research on book clubs is full of examples of conversational learning in action—be that in the professional development of librarians and library staff,²⁰ graduate students,²¹ classroom teachers,²² corporate professionals,²³ or in purely social book clubs.²⁴

Among the most valuable characteristics of a book club is the opportunity for participants to explore difficult or controversial topics in a supportive, safe space.²⁵ This is a key element of inclusive leadership. Building safe spaces in the workplace where colleagues can ask questions, make mistakes, and learn from each other as they explore their biases and grow their knowledge.²⁶

Another benefit of book clubs is their relatively low cost,²⁷ which can be particularly valuable if they are used as staff development opportunities in organizations with little funding for professional development. While some groups may be able to provide a copy of the selected book for each participant, just as many reading groups rely on members to provide their own books. In addition, one does not need access to any special facilities to hold a book club meeting.²⁸

It’s perhaps not surprising that the literature is rich with examples of how book clubs and reading groups foster a sense of community and even friendship among participants,²⁹ sometimes simply by showing readers through group discussion that they have more in common with other people in the group than they thought.³⁰ In professional settings, book clubs have been found to help foster community,³¹ improve working relationships,³² provide opportunities to connect with colleagues one does not usually work with,³³ and to “provide an important route for many of the participants to develop friendships and camaraderie within the workplace.”³⁴ In addition, the dynamic of reading group discussions can help to minimize workplace hierarchies and put participants on equal footing.³⁵ As noted in one article, giving people a safe space where they can discuss shared problems can help workers “to feel seen even outside of the book club.”³⁶

IDEA Book Club at Kresge Library

Oakland University (OU) is an R2 public doctoral research institute located about twenty miles northwest of Detroit, Michigan, with an enrollment of approximately 16,000 undergraduate and graduate students. The university serves a diverse student body, of which 68 percent are white, 8 percent are Black, 6.5 percent are Asian, and 36 percent are first-generation college students.³⁷ Our libraries comprise Kresge Library, which serves undergrad and graduate students at OU, and the School of Medicine Library. Our library faculty and staff of approximately forty-five people are predominantly white and able-bodied, though we do have colleagues with various hidden disabilities. And while I suspect there is a mix of sexualities, the group is overwhelmingly cisgender. As one might expect in an academic library, colleagues are privileged with education and there are a great many advanced degrees among the group.

As a middle-class, cis-het, white woman with an advanced degree, I make a point to acknowledge my privilege and seek to use it to empower those around me. I have intentionally studied diversity topics to better understand and interact with others. As the mother of twins who are members of the LGBTQIA+ community, I seek both personally and professionally to

create warm, welcoming, and judgment-free environments. As an administrator, I lead groups in the library that provide opportunities for committee members to contribute their ideas and energy to make a difference for all members of the library staff. As a leader, I seek to be inclusive in my work and aim to create opportunities for our team members to learn from and with each other in safe settings.

In the winter semester of 2021, the University Libraries' Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility (IDEA) Task Force was formed, and this task force became a standing committee the following year. The group was charged with promoting a welcoming, respectful, and inclusive environment in the University Libraries. Among the first plans that came from the task force was an IDEA book club for library faculty, staff, and student employees. The book club would be accompanied by a related learning opportunity each semester, thus creating a semesterly IDEA theme. Each book club meeting would start with summary information about the book so that colleagues could attend the discussion even if they had not read the book.

The first semester that we ran the book club was fall 2021, when we explored the theme of race by reading *White Fragility* by Robin Diangelo. Because the library budget was flush, we were able to purchase a copy of the book for every employee in the library, including student workers. The hope was that by providing the book to everyone, people might still read it even if they didn't choose to participate in one of the group discussions. After consultations with the libraries' management team, it was agreed that staff members could use work time to read the book, thereby encouraging participation and underlining our team's commitment to the learning process. To encourage colleagues with opposite work schedules to attend book discussions, we hosted gatherings on two separate dates and at different times of day; the discussions were all held via Zoom to make attendance as convenient as possible. (In the end, nearly fifteen people participated in the two meetings, or approximately 33 percent of library employees.) In this first round of book club discussions, we brought in a faculty expert from another university department to moderate the book club; however, while this method was certainly informative and interesting, we found through post-meeting surveys that participants didn't have as much time to discuss the book as they were hoping for.ⁱ Eleven out of twelve respondents (91.6 percent) to our post-discussion survey either somewhat or strongly agreed that the book discussion was helpful in improving their understanding of the theme. We paired this book with a workshop on racial bias later in the semester by the university's Center for Multicultural Initiatives.

For the second semester, in winter 2022, we took up the book *Gender: Your Guide* by Lee Airton. Once again, the budgetary situation allowed us to purchase a copy of the book for every library staff member and student employee. The content of the book guided discussions about gender and sexuality during our two separate book club meetings, which, again, were set up at different times of day in order to encourage attendance by those with opposite schedules; these meetings were also held in a remote format to encourage participation. For this round, the attendance was about the same as the first semester, roughly fifteen people between

i. Because of this, we moved away from having expert moderators in future semesters. Instead, we now share moderating duties among members of the IDEA committee.

the two meetings. Moderating duties were split up among members of the IDEA Committee for each meeting, providing the team members with planning and leadership opportunities. Our post-discussion survey revealed that all participants found the moderator questions to be helpful starting points for discussion and that we provided sufficient time for participant discussion of the book. Thirteen out of fourteen respondents (92.8 percent) either somewhat or strongly agreed that the book discussion was helpful in improving their understanding of the theme. The intention for this theme was to bring in the Gender and Sexuality Center to provide ally training, but scheduling difficulties and staff availability ultimately prevented that session from being held.

The third round of the book club, in fall 2022, featured *We're Not Broken* by Eric Garcia. In this book, Garcia takes a deep look at autism from the point of view of a person who is autistic. At this point, we could no longer afford to purchase books for the staff, so we inter-library loaned copies of the book for all interested individuals based on their responses to an opt-in survey that we sent out at the beginning of the semester. For this title, the IDEA Committee altered our approach and broke the discussions into several meetings across the semester so that we could cover a few chapters at a time rather than the entire book at once. The benefit of this approach is that staff have less content to cover before each meeting, but the drawback is that we could not schedule multiple meetings for each book section to reach every employee. The members of the IDEA Committee once again traded off moderating duties at the meetings. The overall participation by colleagues was lower this semester for the discussions (closer to ten people), likely due to scheduling conflicts. The results of the post-discussion survey revealed that all participants found the discussion to be helpful in improving their understanding of the theme, and eleven out of twelve respondents (91.6 percent) either somewhat or strongly agreed that dividing the book into smaller chunks for discussion made the book club overall more accessible. As a companion to this theme, we welcomed the director of OUCARES, the university's autism outreach service, to present to the staff. She provided a valuable perspective on working with autistic individuals and meeting their diverse needs.

In the next round of the IDEA book club, in winter 2023, we read *Demystifying Disability* by Emily Ladau. An opt-in survey was again sent to all staff members and books were requested through interlibrary loan for interested individuals. We once again divided the book into small sections for each online discussion. Our accompanying training material was a series of online videos that featured the author, the URLs for which were shared with the entire library staff. Overall, participation was lower for this semester, with only seven participants total; this was perhaps due to waning energy in reading a diversity book every semester. Fortunately, all respondents to the post-discussion survey indicated that the discussion was helpful in improving their understanding of the theme.

Finally, in fall 2023, we varied our approach by utilizing articles and videos as our learning materials rather than a book. Our theme was cross-cultural understanding, and the learning material focused on the lived experiences of Jewish, Muslim, and Asian American individuals living in the States. Feedback following this semester indicated that participants quite enjoyed the mixed formats of materials but suggested that the theme was perhaps too broad. While this

semester saw participation of fewer than ten participants across both meetings, the folks who did participate indicated in the survey that they found the readings to have been useful in their understanding of the topic.

Following the cross-cultural understanding theme, the IDEA book club took a hiatus as the committee focused on some other DEI-related projects within the library. We will be bringing back the book club in the winter semester of 2025.

As noted above, a post-book club survey was sent out to the entire library staff following each series of discussions during the semesters. Questions were intended to engage even those individuals who did not participate in the book club that semester in hopes of gauging whether our colleagues opted not to participate due to lack of interest or simply a lack of time. The survey was branched in order to gather additional input from the people who did participate in the discussions about whether they found the discussion sessions to be valuable.

Lessons Learned

In the first two and a half years that we conducted our IDEA book club, we learned a number of important lessons to improve our experiences. These insights came both through the participant surveys as well as from the observations of IDEA Committee members. Below you will find our best practices, backed by research.

For most of us, schedules are busy, brains are full, and commitments are many. Because of this, book club participation should be voluntary, allowing readers to come and go from the group as needed.³⁸ While participation among library staff varies by semester, we have found that there is a core of people who attend nearly every meeting. And while the group discussing the book is often just a small percentage of the whole library staff—perhaps seven people, or 15 percent of the staff and faculty—the literature suggests that this may be a positive, as “book clubs composed of a small number of participants may present environments conducive to conversation and learning, especially for those who are hesitant or shy about participating in larger social groups.”³⁹

There is research that indicates that lack of time is the main reason that people do not participate in book clubs,⁴⁰ so, as mentioned above, we established with department supervisors that it is acceptable for our staffers to read the book club selections during work hours, both to illustrate the administration’s commitment to encourage learning on the job and also to reduce barriers to participation by employees. It is not clear whether this policy increased the number of people participating in the book club.

A practice that we learned quickly is that it is helpful to chunk books into sections and hold multiple meetings throughout the semester rather than have just one discussion about the entire book near the end of the term.⁴¹ We have found that this approach not only makes completing books less daunting for participants but also allows our IDEA Committee members to easily take turns as facilitators. As facilitator, one prepares a summary of the section under discussion and has questions ready to spur conversation should it not start organically. Ideally,

the session facilitator should be inviting and should keep an eye on participants who may not have contributed to the conversation in order to invite their thoughts.⁴² I have been pleased to see how our committee members have enjoyed taking on this leadership role, putting skills to use that they may not have had the opportunity to display in their everyday professional roles.

Finally, we have learned that it is vital to reflect upon how the readings will impact our individual practices. As noted by Greenawald and Adams in an article on nurse book clubs, “Reflecting on issues as presented in the context of a book can prepare nurses to better respond to real-life scenarios,”⁴³ which is certainly true of service and education professions as well.⁴⁴ The ultimate goal of the IDEA book club is to raise staff awareness about inequalities and enhance our cultural humility, moving us all from the unaware stage of the continuum to the advocate stage by “getting actively involved in the change effort, disrupting the status quo, and applying an equity lens to the systems, policies, and practices that surround you.”⁴⁵ Through this effort, we can improve the equity of our services and resources for our community, and the critical inquiry that is spurred by book club discussions can begin that process.⁴⁶ Participants have been responsible individually for enacting changes to their work practices as a result of our readings rather than having library administration mandate any changes.

Conclusion

Jennings and Kinzer state, “We are all affected by systemic whiteness; therefore, action is not about who we are, but rather what we do daily to consciously end inequality.”⁴⁷ As inclusive leaders, it is our role to guide our teams through the conscious task of interrogating our privilege, and we must “lead with purpose” from the “front lines of challenging inequities and changing systems.”⁴⁸

As described in this chapter, our efforts to decenter whiteness and end inequality in our services at Kresge Library have thus far focused primarily on the book club, which has provided valuable learning experiences for all involved and has offered a form of “creative abrasion,” which inclusive leadership author Jennifer Brown describes as a process by which “ideas are productively challenged, avoiding the dangers of groupthink.”⁴⁹ As book club participants, we have certainly benefitted from developing anti-racist mindsets together as we work to develop more inclusive sensibilities and seek solutions to complex problems.

Author Taffy Raphael describes the cultural humility “eureka moment” like this: “In our best moments, our interactions through talk or writing or other modes may cause us to step back, eyes wide open in surprise, as we stumble onto some new recognition of ourselves, whether that be a positive realization or a realization that challenges our current conception of our self-identity.”⁵⁰ My aim is that our IDEA book club produces moments like these, where colleagues can share in moments of recognition and learning, be vulnerable together, and find support from their leaders and each other through the continuing work of increasing their cultural humility in order to provide a more welcoming, accessible, and inclusive service environment for everyone who uses our library.

Notes

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