

**Keeping Up With the Journals:  
A Library Journal Club at Oakland University**

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**Abstract:** Journal clubs, often relied upon in the sciences, can also be applied in the field of librarianship, where busy schedules make it challenging to stay current on research in the field. This article discusses the development of a journal club at Oakland University's Kresge Library.

Journal clubs are a well-established method in the sciences by which current research and topics of interest are presented by participants. More than 100 years ago, Sir William Osler started a journal club at McGill University;<sup>1</sup> since that time, such clubs have become a standard of education in the field of medicine.<sup>2</sup> While the format of journal clubs varies from one institution to another, the goals of such groups often overlap, and include such objectives as developing critical analysis skills, promoting the value of research and scholarship, and networking with peers.<sup>3</sup>

Generally, an article is presented at a meeting by a member of the journal club for the purpose of discussion. Members then analyze the article and discuss the findings during the same meeting. Such a group offers not only the opportunity to stay up-to-date on current trends in a field of study, but participants also benefit from hearing different perspectives on relevant issues: author Brenda Nolf notes that “group discussion and analysis can generate new ideas based on research findings and other practice literature.”<sup>4</sup> In addition, because learning in this format “becomes problem-based, self-directed and clinically relevant,”<sup>5</sup> members are often able to utilize what they discover from the

research. Finally, members reporting on articles get a chance to sharpen their presentation skills and practice fielding questions from an audience, all in a collegial environment.<sup>6</sup>

At Oakland University (OU), located just northwest of Detroit, Michigan, the full-time librarians work in a tenure environment with faculty status. With this status comes the requirement for publication that can be so daunting. The librarians' schedules are filled with reference work, instruction, collection development, service, and other activities with which generally all librarians are familiar, so naturally it's a challenge to find time to stay current on research that others in the field are publishing.

The author felt that starting a library faculty journal club could alleviate some of the pressure of staying on top of research in the field of library science. The idea arose from a conversation with a friend who works at a local cancer research institute, where she participates in a regular journal club with her colleagues during the workday. A search of the literature does not reveal a great deal in terms of holding journal clubs in libraries, with the exception of a program at Kutztown University where a librarians' journal club—which was started a few months before the group at Kresge Library—meets monthly.<sup>7</sup> In addition, some medical libraries use journal clubs as formal venues for earning continuing education credits from the Medical Library Association.<sup>8</sup> However, the format of a journal club can be customized to virtually any location's needs, and there is “considerable variability in approach and outcomes of journal clubs”<sup>9</sup> from institution to institution; therefore the author felt confident that such a group could be utilized readily in the library at Oakland University.

The author presented the journal club idea during a library faculty meeting in the spring of 2004. The suggestion met with broad approval, and it was agreed that the

library faculty would start the Kresge Library (KL) Journal Club in the fall, with three articles presented for discussion at each monthly one-hour meeting which would be moderated by this author. Journal Club would be casual, held over the lunch hour, and members would be welcome to bring their meals along with them. In an effort to encourage attendance, the group's guidelines were set so that members are not required to have read beforehand the articles that will be presented.

The inaugural meeting of the KL Journal Club was held at the end of September 2004, after the librarians had gotten into the swing of the fall semester. A majority of the library faculty attended the meeting, joined by the Library's Dean. The discussions arising from the presentations at this initial meeting were far more in-depth and rousing than anticipated, so the members learned immediately that trying to discuss three articles is simply too ambitious for a one-hour meeting. The group has since moved to a two-article format, which has worked out very well for the allotted one-hour period.

For each meeting, two volunteers select recent library-related articles of interest to present; there are no topic limitations. Generally, members present articles that tie-in with their own work responsibilities; for example, our Collection Development Coordinator presented an article on open-access journals, while our Digital Information Services Librarian discussed an article on virtual reference. This selection system has been surprisingly effective, as the presented research is often relevant to KL's own facility and services. Because of this, discussions have quickly turned to the ways in which the described projects or research could be applied at OU. One colleague noted that Journal Club presents an opportunity "to discuss and share more philosophical observations about the various things that we do or that are being done and/or touted by our profession." She

further noted, “We get together regularly to discuss nits and grits of our services, but generally do not have time to kick the whole thing to a higher level. The club provides such a venue.” And from these kicked-up discussions have already arisen some constructive insights and improvements to the services provided at Kresge Library. For example, based on the findings of one article, the Library Web Team renamed a link on the Library’s home page from “Online Resources” to “Search the Web,” to reflect the terminology students would be looking for when they visit the site.

One significant goal of the KL Journal Club is to share the professional reading load so that the librarians can all stay current on many topics in library science. A fellow junior library faculty member praised the journal club, pointing out that “we now can count on our colleagues to help us stay more well informed about our field, because we now have people at each meeting culling the literature, picking excellent articles, and then distilling them to us in aggregate, something that would take us each, as individuals, far too long.” Though club members are not expected to read the articles beforehand, the author did create a simple web site that lists the presenters for each meeting and the citations for their articles, as well as a link to the full-text of the works when available.

Additional benefits of Journal Club include the opportunity to become familiar with colleagues’ projects and work interests, and discussion of other aspects of librarianship to help members avoid becoming compartmentalized in their own roles. It has been noted that, in libraries, “staff need to be able to see beyond their everyday work to understand the context in which their contribution is being made.”<sup>10</sup> At Kresge Library, Journal Club helps members find that context. Further, one librarian commented that she considers Journal Club “a springboard” for her own scholarship efforts, because

the discussions help her think about her own research differently. The KL Journal Club also holds the potential to spur writing partnerships should members find others in the group have common scholarship interests.

There is a core group of librarians who have attended every meeting—about half the library faculty—and others attend as their schedules permit. Now that each member of the “core group” has presented at least one article, it’s a bit more difficult to find volunteers for repeat performances at future meetings. In an effort to avoid this problem, the author now circulates a sign-up sheet for presenters at the outset of the academic year. As Journal Club organizer, the author also discovered the value of waiting until each semester is well underway before holding the monthly discussions, as meetings early in each semester have upon occasion been cancelled due to scheduling conflicts and members’ time constraints.

Two years into it, colleagues report that they have found the journal club to be useful and effective, and note that it’s actually fun as well. While the KL Journal Club has been a clear success to this point, it will be interesting to see how the momentum lasts. In the meantime, though, future dates are scheduled, and the Kresge Library Journal Club shows no signs of slowing down.

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### Notes

1. M. Linzer, “The Journal Club and Medical Education: Over One Hundred Years of Unrecorded History,” *Postgraduate Medical Journal* 740 (1987): 475-478.
2. Articles supporting this statement include Khalid S. Khan and Harry Gee, “A New Approach to Teaching and Learning in Journal Club,” *Medical Teacher* 21 (1999): 289-293; Patricia O’Sullivan, Judith Pinsker, Jennifer Jeremiah, and Steven A. Wartman, “A Learner-Centered Journal Club,” *Teaching and*

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*Learning in Medicine* 7 (1995): 121-124; Janice Denehy, "Starting a Journal Club," *The Journal of School Nursing* 20 (Aug. 2004): 187-188.

3. Many articles highlight the objectives of journal clubs, including O'Sullivan, Pinsker, Jeremiah, and Wartman, "A Learner-Centered Journal Club"; Denehy, "Starting a Journal Club"; Charles Sherratt, "The Journal Club: A Method for Occupational Therapists to Bridge the Theory-Practice Gap," *British Journal of Occupational Therapy* 68 (July 2005): 301-305.

4. Brenda Nolf, "Journal Club: A Tool for Continuing Education," *The Journal of Continuing Education in Nursing* 26 (Sept./Oct. 1995): 238-229.

5. Simon Gilbody, "Evidence-Based Medicine: An Improved Format for Journal Clubs," *Psychiatric Bulletin* 20 (1996): 673-675.

6. Dixie A. Jones and others, "The Journal Club as an Educational Modality for Librarians: The Louisiana State University Medical Center in Shreveport Experiences," *LLA Bulletin* 55 (Spring 1993): 192-196.

7. Theodore Hickman and Lisa Allen, "A Librarians Journal Club: A Forum for Sharing Ideas and Experiences," *College & Research Libraries News* 66 (Oct. 2005): 642-644.

8. For examples, see Jones and others, "The Journal Club as Educational Modality"; Brenda L. Seago and others, "Journal Club With a Mission," *Bulletin of the Medical Library Association* 82 (Jan. 1994): 73-74.

9. O'Sullivan, Pinsker, Jeremiah, and Wartman, "A Learner-Centered Journal Club," p. 121.

10. Robert Bluck, "Staff Development for Subject Librarians," in *Staff Development in Academic Libraries*, ed. Margaret Oldroyd (London: Library Association Publishing, 1996), 102.