

Facilitating Book Clubs in Asynchronous Graduate Classes

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Introduction

Book clubs have been shown promote professional collaboration among preservice and practicing teachers (Burbank et al., 2010). Since the focus of book clubs is the exchange of ideas and interpretations, there are many opportunities to develop professional communities of practice (Kietzmann et al., 2013; Wenger, 1998). Asynchronous online graduate education classes do not always have a clear way to develop a community of practice among the students. One of the biggest challenges online education faces is feeling isolated from both instructors and students (Bolliger & Inan, 2012; Rovai, 2002; Shieh et al., 2008; Zembylas et al., 2008). By implementing book clubs with the help of video discussion boards, it was our goal to develop such communities. Flipgrid is an online resource for educators. Instead of traditional written discussion, students can post video discussions (ranging from 15 seconds to 10 minutes in length) and respond to their classmates. Both students and instructors have been pleased with the outcomes.

How it Works

At the start of the semester, the students choose from three popular press books associated with course material. For example, the Advanced Pedagogy students selected from *Mindset* by Carol Dweck, *Make it Stick* by Peter Brown, and *The Teenage Brain* by Frances E. Jensen. The students were asked to inform the instructor of their selection to ensure students were fairly evenly distributed among the titles. The students were assigned to book discussion groups.

On Mondays, each book club group was assigned a prompt and the group members responded with comments on a video discussion board. Since the weekly discussion groups were made up of those reading the same title, they had in-depth rich discussions about the material they were reading and how it applied to their personal and professional lives outside of class. Students were expected to post their initial thoughts on the prompt and respond to at least two other groupmates. The responses to the groupmates helped the students to feel like they were having an authentic book club style conversation with their peers. It was not uncommon to see a running conversation unfold, or groupmates offer advice and support to others through the comments. The number of weekly prompts varied based on the course; but traditionally ranging from five to six. Once the groups have finished the set of weekly prompts, each student is assigned to a jigsawed presentation group. These groups contain one person from each discussion group, so the resulting group has a representative from each book.

The book presentation groups are comprised of three to four students. Occasionally, the more popular titles have a second member in the groups. Unlike the discussion groups, whose purpose was a true book club style discussion and analysis, the presentation groups were focused on sharing important information and implications for their book. Each group member was given up to ten minutes to present their book. They were asked to provide a brief overview of their title and discuss the key ideas and topics that influenced their professional practice. After their presentations, they were then asked to comment and respond to their groupmates' videos. Just like in the discussion groups, it was not uncommon to see several groups have extensive discussion using the comment feature. One of the benefits of having presentation groups is it provide all students with brief overviews and key information from each title associated with class.

Results & Implications

When reflecting on the semester at the end of the class, many students discussed their enjoyment and professional benefits of book club. Several have even asked for ideas and suggestions on how to integrate the book club model into their professional settings. Some common themes they discussed were having the ability to choose what book to read, using video discussion board to facilitate the discussion, and the connection to their classmates. The freedom of choice allowed them to select a book that best fit their needs and desires. For several, the ability to choose was important because they had already read several of the titles. At least one student selected a title because the school she was hired at had done a book study on it last year and she felt behind her colleagues.

Using Flipgrid allowed the students have asynchronous discussions that felt like authentic conversations. Several students expressed how the video prompts made it feel like a network of learners instead of anonymous individuals behind computer screens. However, to better facilitate discussions, the instructor must have very clear expectations for timelines for posting initial response and responding to their classmates. Not all students are able to adhere to the weekly timelines which can lead to frustration among the book discussion group members. It is important to ensure frustrated students their grade would not be negatively impacted due to their group members missing and delayed posts.

Getting connected to classmates was another important benefit of book club. Many students have commented on how they feel like they developed a professional community of practice within their discussion groups. Sometimes, a student would post a question or describe a situation they were experiencing (related to the book) and it was not uncommon to see a variety of responses from their groupmates offering support, advice, or sharing a similar experience. Several students have started collaborating on curriculum projects.

Future Plans & Advice to Others

While book clubs had already been successfully integrated into several face-to-face undergraduate classes, we know this process can be adapted to fit both asynchronous online courses and graduate coursework. Based on the success, this will be expanded to other asynchronous and graduate education courses. While special modifications should be made to meet the needs of undergraduate learners (Hales, Hasselquist, & Durr, in press), this same format can be used with graduate students.

The size of the class is an important aspect to monitor. With classes of less than 10, it was helpful to have students identify their first and second choice of books. Occasionally, it is necessary to ask students to read their second choice to ensure all title had at least two people reading them to prompt discussion. With larger classes, it may be necessary to have several discussion groups for the same title. From our experience, the ideal size for online discussion groups is four to six students. They are big enough to ensure a variety of viewpoints, but small enough to develop and maintain a real book club feel.

Cost & Resources Needed

The cost to implement this activity is minimal or can even be free for the instructor and the students. Flipgrid is a free online resource for educators. Educators can create an account and set up as many groups as needed. The cost is associated with purchase of the selected books. The books traditionally retail for \$10- \$25. However, since the choices are popular press books, they are available in many public and university libraries to rent at no cost.

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