

Reading Together

Engaging Undergraduate Writers Through an Online Book Club

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Article abstract

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TEACHING REFLECTION

Reading Together: Engaging Undergraduate Writers Through an Online Book Club

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This teaching reflection examines how “reading together” was fostered in synchronous and asynchronous online environments in two undergraduate creative writing courses through participation in a virtual book club. In the first course, prior to the pandemic, students had the option of meeting in person or via Zoom while we read Daisy Johnson’s *Oedipus Rex* retelling, *Everything Under*, for the book club. In the second course, during the pandemic, students had virtual synchronous and written participation choices while we read together Jessica Anthony’s political satire, *Enter the Aardvark*, with the author visiting in two sessions. In both cases, the goals were consistent: to get students reading as writers; to foster intrinsic motivation through personal choice; and to satisfy students’ desire for community connection while still accommodating personal schedules and geographical location. A virtual book club lets students read on their own schedule and in their own space, but still share their experience and observations with peers over greater distances (and time zones) than would otherwise be possible.

Keywords: book club; creative writing; reading skills; undergraduate; community; COVID-19

Book clubs have long been part of the American cultural landscape (Rubin 1985; Norrick-Ruhl 2019), even before Oprah Winfrey inaugurated her own book club in 1996 (nearly single-handedly revitalizing the publishing industry—see Driscoll 2008; Konchar Farr and Harker 2008; Rooney 2005). Minzesheimer (2011), in examining the so-called “Oprah effect,” quotes Little, Brown publisher Michael Pietsch as stating that Winfrey “didn’t originate the idea of book clubs, but more than anyone, she has spread the idea of reading a book as a shared community” (n.p.). It is this idea of “shared community,” among other things, that makes the book club model attractive as a teaching strategy in many disciplines, including creative writing. For the last two years, including fall (September–December) 2020 when much of the country was in pandemic lockdown and most classes at my small Midwest campus shifted online, I have integrated a book club component into two online undergraduate creative writing classes. In its original iteration, before the pandemic, the shared community of the book club was face-to-face, meeting at the same time and in the same room. However, the onslaught of COVID-19 meant a shift to online modalities for the book club, bringing with it both advantages and challenges, as I will discuss in this reflection.

My goal for both courses was to foster creative reading skills and engagement with new fiction through “reading together” via synchronous and asynchronous participation. The first course was an introduction to creative writing, a general education course attracting first-year students from all majors as well as students entering the creative writing concentration of our English degree. The second was a 300-level fiction writing class. In both cases, I wanted to introduce students to excellent *living* writers, writers who were not too much older than them and were currently publishing exciting literary works. Undergraduates often see writers as distant—maybe even dead!—rather than contemporaries (inevitably, when I ask students to name their favorite short story, they reference something by Poe). Moreover, since both classes were online, there was an ongoing need to create social engagement and overcome the isolation that is so often part of distance learning. “Writing is not a solitary endeavor,” notes writer and teacher Justin Longacre of the Toledo School for the Arts: “It happens in the context of community” (2021, 231). With that in mind, I wanted to leverage

a sense of virtual community to facilitate vibrant discussion of current literary works and how they related to students' perceptions of literature and, of course, their own writing. Underlying all of this was a desire to help strengthen my students' reading muscles and help them see reading as part and parcel of their own artistic process.

Reading as a creative writer, or "creative reading," to channel Emerson (1837), encompasses a different focus on the text than that of leisure reading—one of noticing what effect is being created by the writer and *why* they chose to do it that way. It is like looking under the hood of a car to figure out how the engine works or slowing down a video of an elite runner to study foot strikes. Creative reading is certainly akin to close reading but with a different, perhaps more self-serving, goal: to expand one's repertoire of writing strategies, to "steal like an artist," as Austin Kleon (2012) says.

The book club model has been used by educators in various disciplines to help students connect course concepts to non-academic or "real world" scenarios, as well as to strengthen reading skills via a "collective literary experience" (Sylvan 2018, 226). Scourfield and Taylor's (2014) undergraduate social work program employs the book club as a co-curricular activity where students discuss program content through the lens of popular fiction, promoted through the university's learning management system (LMS) as well as via a dedicated Twitter feed. In fact, in one semester, club tweets were seen by the book club novel's author, who later arranged to attend a meeting. Wyant and Boen (2018) describe book clubs for sociology students held either during class time (face-to-face) or via online discussion forums, which let students engage with sociological concepts within a fictional "shared reality" (262). Cohen's (2006) book club is organized to help business students develop ethical awareness by reading popular non-fiction. Verran (2019) analyzes how a book club for first-year biomedical students lends insight into how infectious disease is perceived by non-scientists, leading to productive discussions on such diverse topics as the laboratory environment and representations of female scientists. Similarly, Griffard, Mosleh, and Kubba (2013) track how participation in a book club helps pre-med students learn about biology through a historical/cultural lens. Ruzich and Canan (2010) developed a book club for high school seniors to bridge the summer between graduation and the first year of college. In this case, it was an entirely online book club or, as they describe it, "a summer reading assignment that would *mimic* book club participation" (62, emphasis added). Such a distinction is worth noting, particularly when academic book clubs are compared with non-academic or "real" ones, a.k.a., the "productive adult book club" (Beach and Yussen 2011). The biggest difference, of course, is that the latter's members *choose* to be there while the former's do not. Some programs avoid this element of compulsion by making the club optional or extra-curricular but then the students who might benefit the most from its "collaborative exchange of ideas" may not sign up due to lack of extra time (see Scourfield and Taylor 2014; Ruzich and Canan 2010, 65).

Integrating the club into course curriculum has other advantages—the "shared reality" of reading a common creative work contributes to classroom community as well as to collaborative learning (Wyant and Bowen 2018, 262). Moreover, student learning is enriched when instructors draw on book club discussions in lectures or otherwise connect the book to course concepts in various contexts. The key to successful "mimicking" of book club participation, then, lies in fostering intrinsic motivation ("I'm doing this because it's interesting and worthwhile") rather than extrinsic ("I'm doing this because I want a good grade"). Although it might be difficult to avoid extrinsic motivators entirely, their potentially deleterious impact can be minimized by letting students have as much control over their learning as is feasible (Bain 2014). To that end, I sought to maximize choice in how students participated in the book clubs, as I will describe further.

Given the variety of disciplines already using the book club model, its application in a creative writing course seemed like a natural fit. We already did plenty of reading in my classes because, to paraphrase novelist Stephen King (2000), writing well requires reading well (see also Sellers 2017, 35; LaPlante 2007, 40; Kardos 2017, 3). At this point, it is useful to clarify two key differences between the book club model and conventional literature-based discussions, as used within my own online course. It is important to note that the book club does not replace regularly scheduled literature discussions (done asynchronously via learning management software forums in online classes) but, rather, augments them. The book club model offered: one, the ability to introduce a genre not otherwise covered in the curriculum; and two, a flexible structure by which students could have synchronous, face-to-face interaction with me, each other and, in fall 2020, a visiting author. With respect to the former, the book club allowed me to assign a work that was significantly different than anything else students would read that semester and from which they could glean new insights in a way that was more holistic. Most of the readings we do support specific craft elements and short writing assignments focused on helping students practice characterization, dialogue, imagery, and so on. The book club let students tackle a novel, a form we were not otherwise reading that

semester. The novel's length, multiple plot lines, cast of characters, and complexity (perfect for sparking discussion), as well as its absence from my curriculum otherwise, made it the perfect candidate for a book club. With respect to the second point, the book club allowed multiple opportunities for face-to-face interaction, which can otherwise be difficult, if not impossible, in a fully online, asynchronous course.

I knew, too, that I wanted to share new work with my students, ideally by a young(er), lesser-known or emerging writer. Good writing is ongoing, part of the current cultural milieu, and I wanted students to learn new names, to feel like part of that "shared community" referenced by Pietsch earlier and to interact with each other outside of the ordinary boundary of classroom time. Finally, the onslaught of COVID-19 affected the pedagogical backdrop for all of this planning, as it did so many things, raising the need for social distancing and a fully online modality. Could a book club still work without the face-to-face interaction of a "shared community"?

In this reflection, I will describe two different approaches to the book club over two semesters. Although the book club model was generally successful in enriching students' reading skills and in offering productive choice in participation, careful planning was needed to sustain a virtual "shared community" of readers and writers. These courses had been online pre-COVID, and so the challenge for building connection within the virtual classroom was already there. That such connection is critical to learning, not just in the area of creative writing but in general, has been demonstrated repeatedly. Darby and Lang (2019) draw on numerous works—including Vygotsky's zone of proximal development; Garrison, Anderson, and Archer's 1999 research on communities of inquiry; and Joshua Eyler's 2018 *How Humans Learn*—to argue that while social interaction needs more purposeful planning in an online setting than in traditional classrooms, it is critical to successful cognitive engagement. Social presence—by instructor and students alike—is key to students being intellectually present.

Spring Book Club (Pre-COVID)

For my first undergraduate book club in spring 2019, I chose *Everything Under* by Daisy Johnson, shortlisted for the 2018 Man Booker (see Appendix 1). This was an easy choice for a number of reasons. One, as a contemporary adaptation of *Oedipus Rex*, it offered a storyline with which some upper-level students might already be somewhat familiar. Two, the quality of the writing was just superb, with haunting, unexpected imagery, a gender-fluid protagonist, and a challenging non-linear narrative, all of which made the work appropriate for a 300-level course. And three, since one of my goals was to connect students with living writers, especially those at least somewhat closer to their own age, the age of the author was a positive factor. Johnson is a very young writer, just in her mid-twenties at the time she published the novel, which I hoped would resonate with students.

The class was a small (sixteen students), fully online 300-level fiction writing course with a focus on developing three short stories over the course of the semester. Because it was asynchronous, students could not be required to meet at a particular time. However, many lived in the area and so my goal was to offer *opportunity* for face-to-face meet-ups for those who desired such interaction as well as *choice* in when to attend. Students had to attend at least two of the five scheduled sessions, either in person or via zoom. Sessions were held at different times throughout the semester, including Saturday afternoons (if a student was unable to attend *any* of the scheduled times due to work or other obligations, an alternative graded assignment was provided).

Each book club week included a short written assignment posted on the course LMS, which everyone would complete prior to the meeting (whether attending or not) and the prompt for which would be the starting point of the discussion. My hope was that having students prepare written responses in advance would encourage verbal participation since they had something to say. Moreover, the assignment prompts were crafted to guide students in their reading, a strategy identified as a best practice by Wyant and Bowen (2018). The reading assignments were fifty- to sixty-page chunks. The reading schedule, along with the Zoom link and the location of the physical meeting—either at a downtown art gallery operated by the university or in my office on campus—were posted at the beginning of the semester.

I hoped that the meeting locations would help foster a convivial atmosphere. The art gallery was an airy and welcoming space off campus, without an overly institutional atmosphere. But there was a second advantage to holding sessions there: English faculty led free drop-in creative writing workshops for the community, which were scheduled right after book club meetings. My intention was to offer additional motivation for students to attend—two events, back-to-back, might make a drive even more worthwhile and heighten the sense of being part of a writing community. In this way, the online course could encompass both asynchronous (completing the reading and questions on one's own) and synchronous (real-time discussions), virtual (via Zoom) and face-to-face (for those who could attend in person) choices that supported and

amplified each other. Students could finish a book club session with Daisy Johnson's wonderfully jarring imagery reverberating through their minds, then have the opportunity to practice their own writing with a small group of local writers in an informal, non-academic setting. The choice of holding book club meetings at my office was similarly made with atmosphere, as well as pragmatics, in mind. It was quiet, easily accessible for students who were already on campus, and more personal than other public spaces, with family pictures, hot tea, plants, lots of books, and non-fluorescent lighting. The vibe was more of a home space than an institutional one, which I hoped would be more conducive to relaxed discussions.

Fall Book Club (with COVID Restrictions)

The second book club was held under somewhat different circumstances, not the least of which was the challenge of the pandemic. The class was an online introduction to creative writing that draws students in the creative writing concentration as well as non-majors seeking a general education credit. As an introductory course, the emphasis was on foundational elements of creative writing, exploring poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction as expressive forms and developing creative reading skills. Restrictions due to COVID meant that all book club meetings would have to be entirely virtual, with no face-to-face option. My goals, however, remained the same—to support reading skills through “reading together,” to foster intrinsic motivation through personal choice, and to offer opportunity for community connection while still accommodating student schedules.

One of my goals was to spur intrinsic motivation by letting students control as much of their learning as was feasible (Bain 2014). Pre-COVID, students could choose which book club sessions to attend and whether via Zoom or in person. During COVID, since in-person attendance was off the table, students could choose how many sessions to attend and what kind of written or creative response they would correspondingly complete. With respect to this last option, student work ended up including such creative responses as alternative endings to Anthony's novel, a new scene from the point of view of a minor character, and an infographic mapping the journey of the eponymous aardvark.

However, one area of preference was missing: book choice. Ideally, book club participants collaborate in choosing club readings rather than the decision being made solely by the instructor (e.g., Sylvan 2018; Beach and Yussen 2011). This approach can promote student buy-in and motivation but can present its own challenges within an academic setting, particularly if required reading lists must be published well in advance of the semester. One alternative is to create a menu of four or five works from which students can choose, as discussed in Sylvan (2018), an idea that I may implement the next time I use this model. Regardless, in both courses discussed here, my choice was driven by fairly simple parameters: effective literary prose that could be used to demonstrate craft strategies; a contemporary writer who was relatively youthful (so that students could feel at least some generational connection); and vibrant and socially relevant plot lines that would provoke discussion.

In the case of my fall book club, there was another factor influencing choice: the opportunity for the author to actually participate in book club sessions! Each year, we bring a writer to campus to give a reading and teach a master class. Because of the pandemic, our visiting writer, novelist Jessica Anthony, was unable to attend and had to give her reading virtually. In discussing how we might facilitate the second part of her visit—the master class—I proposed that we try something different. Instead of a ninety-minute online class, might she agree to three thirty-minute chats with my first-year students' book club? Anthony agreed. The book club would read her newest novel, *Enter the Aardvark* (2020), a political satire alternating between contemporary and Edwardian plot lines, each with a queer protagonist. The book was both funny and timely and I knew students would love it. They would also have the opportunity to get another perspective on craft and process; the prospect of meeting the author would add enrichment and motivation to their reading. Just as importantly, I hoped that engaging with Anthony would help them understand how literary fiction can be socially relevant and culturally engaged. The fully online, synchronous modality, via Zoom, meant that students from different geographical locations could interact in real time with our virtually visiting writer, who would remain at her home in Maine.

As with spring, I wanted students to *choose* to attend book club rather than feel forced; at the same time, I did not want to unnecessarily add to the already heavy academic and personal load carried by many of our students. To that end, I lowered the attendance requirement for the fall book club: students only had to attend one session. I also restructured the written component of the book club. Instead of having to submit a written response prior to each meeting, students were provided with discussion questions to guide their reading and to serve as the starting point of each session's discussion. There was nothing to submit prior to a meeting. Instead, there would be a single assignment due at the end of the semester that encompassed their overall experience reading the novel.

Students were able to exercise choice in how they participated: the more book club sessions they attended, the less they had to produce by way of written response. They also had some control over the form of their response. So, for example, if a student only attended one session, the book club assignment at semester's end was either a conventional literary essay or a hybrid response to the novel, using a mix of images, text, video, and/or other modalities (see assignment description in Appendix 2). Of course, attending only a single session meant that a student was not fully benefiting from the social interaction or sense of community, but they were still able to demonstrate their engagement with the novel, their "reading as writers." The essay assignment asked for analysis of Anthony's use of images, energy, tension, and insight (based on our class text, Heather Sellers' *The Practice of Creative Writing*), and so in that way they could integrate course concepts with their book club reading. If students attended two sessions, their response would be a two-page personal reflection. If they attended three, the response could be brief and creative—a poem, a short scene, a hand-drawn comic strip or, really, any imaginative form that they chose, as long as it demonstrated knowledge of the novel in some way. And if students attended all four sessions? No written response was required. See Appendix 2 for book club assignments.

My intention in structuring the written component of the book club in this manner was to incentivize participation via discussion while minimizing written homework, a departure from the spring book club model. "Attendance" meant being present for the whole session and having at least one substantive comment to contribute, a fairly low threshold. My fear that omitting the advanced written response would dampen verbal participation did not, in fact, hold true when comparing the spring with the fall club discussions. There was no real difference; in both semesters, conversation lagged at first but, after a minute or so and some gentle prompting on my part, soon started and flowed well in both classes. And in both classes, it was clear that students, once warmed up, enjoyed talking about their responses to the book and the ideas it spawned for them. A second fear in the fall was that Anthony's presence, as the author, would cause shyness among students; I was wrong on that point as well. In fact, during her first visit, a conversation sprung up among students that was so lively and prolonged that I finally had to respectfully intervene in order to invite her into the conversation.

Reflection on Experiences

Both Wyant and Bowen (2018) and Verran (2019) find that in-person discussion time is critical to success, a finding with which I agree. Yet, moving the book club online does not necessarily prevent in-person discussion since video conferencing platforms like Zoom allow for organic exchanges that contribute to a dynamic experience and have the potential to create that sense of "reading together." The discussion prompts for each session were developed to foster substantive, self-directed conversation among students and, in the case of the fall book club, with Jessica Anthony, our visiting writer. The challenge, of course, was to provide enough scaffolding so that students understood expectations for participation while, at the same time, offering enough leeway to encourage self-directed and spontaneous expressions. To do this, I employed two different kinds of questions: questions which drew attention to specific moments in the text and exemplified the specificity that students needed to bring to the discussion (e.g., What do you notice about the concept of the Namibians' belief about wearing "skins of the enemy," the practice of taxidermy and Alexander Wilson's own obsession about wearing Ronald Reagan's clothes?) and open-ended questions that might extend the discussion in some new way, based on what students found personally interesting (e.g., What effect did the opening have on you as a reader? How does Anthony create energy in this section?). In both courses, discussion prompts were such that students needed to read carefully, drawing on both content knowledge and their own aesthetic sensibility as a creative writing student. Prompts were also meant to guide students' reading, to help them better notice both content and craft elements, which is a key part of creative reading (Sellers 2017, 35; LaPlante 2007, 40; Kardos 2017, 3). As another example, one of the prompts for *Everything Under* was: *Consider Sarah as a character. Would you describe her as a memorable character? Does she (so far) come across with some complexity? Ideally, we want a character to be both unexpected and yet convincing. Do you think Johnson has accomplished this?*

Was a sense of "reading together" created? Yes, particularly with those students who attended the most frequently. The first few minutes of each session in both semesters were usually given over to a group rant about pet peeves with the book or with school, generating a certain camaraderie. But more substantive, self-directed discussion usually followed, especially when students directed questions at each other or, in the case of fall semester, at our visiting writer, instead of at me as instructor. While the prompts were used as starting points, the discussion was not constrained by the prompt and would generally move in a new direction, which is exactly what I wanted to see as an instructor. I repeatedly reminded students that it was *their*

discussion they were holding, not mine. Students' sense of agency became more apparent when author Jessica Anthony was present for book club sessions, and they felt free to ask her about how the novel was initiated and developed. In fact, there was more discussion on process than on the novel's actual content in those sessions. Given that my emphasis throughout the semester was on helping students think of themselves as writers, to take their burgeoning craft seriously, this was a highly positive outcome and one that was mentioned by students in their course comments.

There was little, if any, difference in the overall quality of discussion that occurred with spring's hybrid modality compared to the fully online setting in fall. If anything, discussions went more easily when *everyone* was on Zoom, as if leveling the interpersonal playing field. Students who attended more frequently got to know each other by name, something that rarely happens in an asynchronous online class. A few discovered that they were in other classes together, which introduced a level of connection that did not exist before. In spring semester (pre-COVID), I was pleasantly surprised at how many students chose to attend face-to-face, but disappointed that more did not stick around for the community writing workshop that followed.

As an aside, one of the advantages of using a newly published or lesser-known novel is that there is relatively little material available online from which students might draw to avoid actually reading (see Broz 2011 for interesting comparisons). Written responses from both semesters were mostly of good quality, with students not shying away from articulating both struggles and insights, particularly in the case of the Johnson novel, which many found challenging.

Wyant and Bowen (2018) identify four best practices for undergraduate book clubs: one, keep groups small; two, offer guiding questions to help students prepare; three, have groups meet multiple times over the semester; and four, reference relevant ideas from the club book in instructor lectures or other aspects of the course. They found that, while having students post responses to an online forum was useful, in-person discussions "facilitated stronger connections between students and allowed them to teach each other" (Wyant and Bowen 2018, 269). This aligns with my own experience, even when using video conferencing platforms to facilitate synchronous, real-time discussions. Although there was inevitably an initial awkwardness and accompanying silence, conversation surged once students warmed up; the more sessions that students attended, the more comfortable they became with the modality. Moreover, keeping cameras on also contributes to conviviality. Guiding questions based on the assigned reading help students to prepare productively, while attendance at more than two sessions allows students to get to know each other more than otherwise occurs in solely online, asynchronous settings.

The last aspect to address in this reflection is the question of instructor presence. In the reviewed literature, many book club sessions are students-only but, as in the case of book choice, not all. For example, Cohen (2006) is not only present during his whole-class book club discussions but also has community guest speakers and even provides themed meals, while Columbia's Center for the Professional Education of Teachers recommends that the instructor "lead by example" during book club sessions by demonstrating good listening skills (2017, 4). Similarly, social work book club sessions have staff facilitators lead discussion (Scourfield and Taylor 2014). Both pre-COVID and during COVID, I wanted to be present since this was one more way to provide learner-instructor interaction, which is critical to meaningful online learning. Students value instructor participation in online discussion forums; my experience has been that they feel similarly about instructor presence in its virtual, synchronous equivalent (see Darby 2019, 40). As well, I was concerned that sessions might end up overly short or otherwise devolve into unproductive or off-topic time. To address this, a student might be assigned as discussion leader for each session, responsible for keeping conversation on track or leading via discussion questions that they have prepared themselves (see Ruzich and Canan 2010; Scourfield and Taylor 2014). Another option is to assign groups to work on a collective, collaborative project in connection with the book—a group presentation, for example, as Wyant and Bowen (2018) do. Students are able to use club time to work on the presentation, for which they are given a collective grade worth 60 percent of the total book club grade. This is an interesting possibility that I may consider further, though I tend to view the group presentation assignment as posing its own pedagogical challenges, which might distract from the goals of the book club as it is used in my classes.

Conclusion

The pandemic upended how we teach, but the pervasiveness of new technologies, like Zoom and other video platforms, opened up new pedagogical possibilities. The potential of the undergraduate book club to foster reading skills, introduce students to new writers, and help students engage with new ideas and create

connections lies not in whether students are literally present, but intellectually and emotionally present. And that kind of presence can be fostered through flexible and thoughtful book club design, regardless of modality.

Appendices

- Appendix 1: Spring Book Club (Pre-COVID)
- Appendix 2: Fall Book Club (During COVID)

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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