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IT'S NOT JUST A BOOK CLUB: A NOVEL APPROACH TO PREPARE RESEARCHERS FOR PRACTICE

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A diverse group of researchers faced the challenge of developing practical proficiency in using Universal Design for Learning (UDL). In order to address the problem, the group initiated a book club strategy to develop a common understanding of principles of UDL. Their book club supported collaborative and reflective discussions, which informed their practice. In this paper, we share our lived experiences with book club as a professional learning strategy. Out of this experience, three recommendations are offered: intentional selection of the book, shared facilitation in support of a community of practice, and fostering collaborative professional learning.

Keywords: Book club; Universal design for learning; Field experiences

INTRODUCTION

A challenge when working with a diverse group of researchers can be the lack of a common understanding or common experience with a given topic. What is required is to provide a common lived experience where individuals are given the opportunity to learn more of the work within a learning community context. One such experience occurred with a diverse group of researchers challenged with developing proficiency in the use of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in order to

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design and develop a blended learning environment. A book club approach as a professional development strategy was used which fostered active, collaborative discussions and scholarly exploration of the topic. This was the catalyst that helped form a community of practice among members of the group.

The purpose of this article is threefold: First, to provide an overview of how a book club strategy can be implemented to foster scholarly discourse and provide members a common experience to inform their understanding of the topic; second, to share our experience of using a book club and what we have learned from the experience; and third, to present three recommendations for the purpose of using of a book club strategy in support of preparing researchers for practice.

BOOK CLUBS

Book clubs are a unique social learning approach that allows for individuals to engage with content in traditional face-to-face settings and/or virtual environments (Sedo, 2003). Consisting of “small, peer-led reading discussion group[s]” (Daniels, 2002, p. 1), book clubs appear under a variety of names such as literature circles, cooperative book discussion groups, reading clubs and literature discussion groups (Daniels, 2002; Penson, 2011). As outlined in this paper, the implementation of a book club can promote a community of practice through collaboration, personal meaning-making through reflective discourse, and the development of self-efficacy in learning.

General context of a book club

During a book club discourse, individuals engage in thoughtful dialogue that allows the reader to construct reflective experiences based on his/her personal interactions with the text. Specifically, Long (2003) described the process of book clubs as “conversations [that] allow participants to clarify their own insights and opinions and also to integrate the various perspectives other readers bring to the book” (p. 187). As the reader shares his/her thoughts, a more meaningful frame of understanding is developed and the knowledge

community is increased and interpretations are made through social interactions (McMahon & Raphael, 1997).

Book club is “not a spontaneous activity” (Daniels, 2002, p. 80). Rather, it is activities that are regularly structured through agreed upon methods for sharing personal reflections. To effectively contribute to the cohort’s knowledge building, each book club is set up to engage the specific age and learning levels of the members. While these structures can be framed in a variety of ways, they are viewed as “long-term investments” (Daniels, 2002, p. 81) for learning.

From the research, seven commonalities have been identified among book clubs that assist students in achieving learning outcomes. Included in the commonalities are: 1) structured roles for members (i.e. each participant is given a specific role to help support peer discussion); 2) use of collaborative models; 3) development of self-efficacy through social interaction; 4) participant involvement based on book choice; 5) regularly scheduled meeting times; 6) discussion is through meaningful, open conversation and personal reflection; and 7) social constructivist frameworks (Chia-Hui, 2004; Daniels, 2002; McMahon & Raphael, 1997; Guthrie & Wigfield, 1997). Further in a higher education setting, book clubs are used to develop personal meaning through “co-constructed conversations” (Addington, 2001, p. 213) at varying levels including pre-service teachers with young students, undergraduate and graduate students as well as among professorial roles.

THE BOOK CLUB

The purpose of a design-based research was to develop an online learning environment for undergraduate Field Experience courses using Universal Design for Learning principles. Early in the design process, we discovered that there were varying understandings and a diverse range of experience using UDL. In order for the research team to do well in the design of the online environments, we engaged in professional learning experience for the purpose of developing a shared understanding through the use of a book club strategy.

In our book club, all participants had a leadership role by summarizing his/her assigned chapter and leading the bi-weekly group discussion. That happened over the course of several weeks, at the beginning of the project. Although each team member was responsible for leading each session, there were some common steps in each session. After some general introductory announcements, the session leader would introduce the topic being debated for some 5 to 7 minutes. After that period, a conversation would emerge about key points of the book that resonated with each one of the team member. This process was facilitated by questions crafted by the session leader, or spontaneously by the group members. During the conversation, a constant focus was on how to transfer the collective knowledge created by the group into concrete actions and measures for the design project. After each session, the leader shared their notes with all members. This continuous repository of notes on UDL was crucial for the design process for the project, as it allowed quick access to relevant information about the framework.

One powerful aspect of our book club strategy was that all group members had similar responsibilities. In contrast, in other book club groups, the discussions can easily be “guided” narrowly by the leader and his / her agenda. Our book club context allowed us to collaborate through presenting our perspectives, negotiating our ideas, and resolving our misunderstandings. Moreover, it provided an opportunity for us to go beyond the idea of understanding the content, so to explore the innovative teaching and learning ideas that we wanted to implement in our research project.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Our reading group of six researchers (four doctoral students and two academic staff) met on a regular basis within a three-month timeframe. We had two key aims: First, to acquire a deeper collective understanding of UDL. Second, to apply that UDL knowledge in the design of the online learning environment for the research project. “Applied research is frequently descriptive research and its main strength is its immediate practical use” (Neuman, 1997, p.33). It is a form of research directly connected to the improvement of organizational practices and problems. Action research, a category of applied research, is aimed at solving a specific problem by engaging a group of individuals in an organization to study a problem in order to

da Rosa dos Santos et al.

solve it (Patton, 2002). Action research is self-reflective and thus promotes an understanding of the groups' own practices and the situations in which the practices are carried out (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p.162).

Action researchers should seek the views of others as to the meaning of the data they have (Carr & Kammis, 1986). During our book club meetings, we were able to bring our personal insights and experiences into the discussion and shape the collective understanding that emerged from our conversations, which can be viewed as a form of collective self-reflection. The reflective accounts of our book club meetings were summarized by one individual each week and shared among the group. These written accounts formed the basis of our information gathering on UDL and allowed us to build a better informed plan for the design and development of the research project.

REFLECTING ON OUR EXPERIENCE

Aside from the specific knowledge we gained about UDL and the potential ways we can apply the principles of UDL in our work, three critical themes emerged from the collective reflections and shared discussions from our book club. Each will be discussed in the following section: 1) communication and collaboration; 2) meaning-making; and 3) self-efficacy.

Community and collaboration

The importance of collaboration and the shift towards community was an essential characteristic of our book club. Each participant commented in their reflections on this aspect of the experience. One student mentioned: *"I believe the strength of our discussions came from the collaborative nature of our group – we were able to build on each other's ideas and provide possible examples as related to our upcoming course re-design"* (S1). With reading being a primarily interpretive response by each individual (Childress & Friedkin, 2012), the sharing of one's reading experience and reflections (i.e. individual engagement) allows for other participants to encounter affirming or challenging ideas to their own personal reflections (Guthrie & Wigfield, 1997). Through the process of collaborative discourse, the book club provided a framework for participants to critically examine ideas and thoughts in an open environment that is poised for community building and active participation (McMahon & Raphael, 1997).

From the practice of collaboration, a sense of community also grew. *“I realized that as a learning community, we came to know more about each other and the variety of perspectives each of us held. Our discussions gave us the opportunity to learn from each other and to work towards developing common insights about UDL”* (AS1). This was also evidenced by Smith (1996), who found that faculty book club participants expressed enjoyment from learning through their colleagues’ previous experiences, appreciated the equality demonstrated among its members and the “spirit of cooperation” (p. 184) displayed by the non-disruptive conversations among members.

Meaning-making

All group members expressed the way in which their understanding of UDL had deepened because of the book club experience. One participant noted that *“we were given an opportunity not only to share a different perspective on one topic, but also brainstorm and explore innovative teaching and learning ideas”* (S2). Another participant stated that the *“book club went beyond the idea of understanding the content; we actually discussed how the content would be implemented in our project”* (S3). Described by Raphael, Kehus and Damphousse (2001) as “ownership” (p. 22), a book club allows for participants to be active in their attainment of meaning initiated through the collaborative discourse and reflective activities. Sometimes presented through critical incident of learning (i.e. ah-aha moment), during and after the scheduled meeting times or in more formal written responses, individual ownership of understanding emerged. The development of the ownership is part of the complexity of a meaningful learning process.

Self-efficacy

Most group members expressed a shift in their understanding of UDL. As noted by one member, initially *“UDL was a framework used solely towards assistive learning ... Because it was something distant from my reality, I had never understood its intricacies and possible applications. Nevertheless, this has changed with the book club.”* (S4) Addressing the impact of book club on participants, Schrunk and Zimmerman (1997) suggested that the complex process of sense-making also involves self-evaluation which in turn influences motivation and overall self-efficacy.

One member concluded that the knowledge constructed by individuals and the group through book club would transform their instructional design practice. *“Through our upcoming work, we now are going to put theory into practice. It is not a matter of just talking, but now it is about action”* (AS2). Knowledge to practice and practice informed by knowledge were practical goals of our book club learning community. As Daniels (2002) stated, a book club allows learners to “go through a developmental process of problem-solving, adjusting and fine-tuning” (p. ix).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing on the literature and our experiences, the following three recommendations are designed to support the use of book clubs as part of preparing researchers for practice. First, the selection of a book needs to provide a large enough scope so all members find an area of interest or something of value. It can foster ownership of their professional learning by allowing individuals to select the chapter(s) or section(s) they want to lead and/or facilitate discussion with the group. Second, through the intentional shared facilitation of discussion of the book, it sows the seeds for the emergence of a community of practice. Through the interactions and commitment to learning through the use of book club, participants begin to influence each other’s learning within the community. Third, using a book club strategy embedded in a community of practice allows individuals to investigate, reflect, discuss and collaborate. Such engagement in collaborative professional learning may lead to a shift in thinking and broadening perspectives that otherwise cannot be achieved by an individual’s reading of the book alone.

CONCLUSION

Our purpose for using a book club approach was to develop our proficiency in the use of UDL, given the diversity of our knowledge and experience with this framework. Throughout the book club experience, we were able to present our perspectives, negotiate ideas, and resolve misconceptions that enabled us to have a greater common understanding of UDL. The book club was a starting point for our collaborative team, which quickly evolved into a community of practice. The initial building of self-efficacy as individuals strengthened the outcomes of the collaborative interactions during the scholarly book club discussions.

da Rosa dos Santos et al.

From our book club experience, two main learning outcomes emerged. First, identifying and discussing our assumptions and our experiences through book club led to a deeper understanding and ability to make practical inferences. Second, sharing the leadership role among participants allowed for increased reflection and development of each member's understandings of UDL. The book club provided us with an opportunity to have a shared experience of reading, discussing and establishing new collective understandings, which created a foundation to inform our research project.

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da Rosa dos Santos et al.

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