

Practices of Productive Adult Book Clubs

This analysis of two adult book clubs finds that collaboratively selecting engaging books, sharing knowledge and expertise that provide new insights into books, and developing topics in some depth are practices that contribute to productive book club discussions.

Richard Beach | Steven Yussen

Several years ago, the two authors became part of a newly formed all-men's book group whose largely middle-aged members worked in both higher education and business. Although our book club is nine years old as of 2011, we had also witnessed an all-women's book club that had been meeting for 21 years.

We were particularly interested in identifying those practices that contribute to the success and longevity of these two book clubs. Given the fact that many adults in the United States participate in book clubs, and in thinking about our own club in relation to other adult reading groups, we wondered about the practices that are conducive to productive book clubs.

Practices of Productive Book Clubs

Research has identified a number of practices contributing to productive book clubs. Some studies have contrasted book club and classroom discussions. In contrasting adult book club discussion with high-school classroom discussions, Smith (1996) found that adult book club discussions were more egalitarian and collaborative than high school classroom discussions. Another study of discussions in a graduate English education course organized as a book club revealed discussions of a more collaborative, personal, and less text-driven and teacher-directed nature than typical discussions in a graduate literature course (Addington, 2001).

In productive book clubs, members draw on their knowledge and experience in recommending and sharing books, resulting in the selection of books that not only appeal to book club members but also result in engaging discussions (Farr & Kurtzahn-Beach, 2006; Long, 2003). Members are more likely to draw on their knowledge and experience in making recommendations when their club has a codified, equitable procedure for selecting books based on background research, reviews, and word-of-mouth recommendations as well as consideration of other members' interests and knowledge (Farr & Kurtzahn-Beach, 2006; Long, 2003).

In the 19th century, book clubs served as sites for women's collective sense of intellectual solidarity.

In productive book clubs, members also capitalize on each other's knowledge or experience in selecting or discussing books. They therefore join and share responses knowing that other members are bringing different knowledge and experiences to construct collaboratively new composite interpretations (Addington, 2001; Smith, 1996).

Members also value the opportunity to share their own life experiences and address issues evoked by their reading (Rooney, 2005; Smith, 1996), a practice evident in one book club in which club members drew on characters' perspectives to help them reinterpret past events in their lives (Sumara, Luce-Kapler, Robson, & Catlin, 2008). And, members may find support for their own social or political attitudes. In the 19th century, women's book clubs served as sites for women's collective sense of intellectual solidarity and resistance to patriarchy (Long, 2003), resulting in their continued popularity with women (Scheil, 2006; Twomey, 2007).

A second factor shaping the success of book clubs is the degree to which different members are willing to participate in discussions in ways that generate alternative interpretations (Addington, 2001; Smith, 1996). Members' willingness to participate may be evident in *extended stretches*—instances in which different members explore a topic in some depth over an extended number of turns (Beach, Eddleston, & Philippot, 2004). These extended stretches are more likely to occur when a number of members share different interpretations or perspectives on a text, resulting in a sustained, collaborative development of interpretations that transcend individual members' own interpretations (Beach et al., 2004).

At the same time, book clubs can be challenged when members differ in their knowledge of literary or genre conventions, leading to variations in their ability to interpret literary texts (Smith, 1996). Members with more background knowledge of literary conventions may be more likely to adopt a *point-driven* stance—interpreting larger thematic or symbolic meanings of literary texts—while members with less background knowledge may adopt a *story-driven* stance, focusing more on storyline development (Hunt, 2000).

Determining differences in members' adoption of a point-driven versus a story-driven stance may explain disparities in levels of participation. Members who lack background knowledge of literary conventions and adopt a story-driven stance may be reluctant to participate when other members adopt a point-driven stance.

A Study of Two Productive Adult Book Clubs

Because we perceived both the women's and our men's book clubs as relatively productive, we wanted to study instances of how these identified practices contributed to the productivity of these two book clubs. We therefore conducted a study from January 2007 to November 2008.

The participants in this study were nine members of the women's book club, ages 63 to 80, and seven members of a men's book club, ages 61 to 68; all were middle- to upper- middle class Caucasians. The two researchers are university colleagues along with two other members of the men's club, Greg and Michael. One member of the women's club, Linda, is the spouse of one of the researchers. Both clubs fostered social interactions between members outside of discussing books through dinners either before or after the book discussions. All members granted their consent to participate in the study.

The women's book club consisted of three anthropologists, a librarian, a college foreign exchange administrator, a history teacher, a college president's executive assistant, a college English teacher, and a former English teacher/human resource consultant. The club met monthly at different members' homes beginning with a discussion followed by dinner. The fact that discussions occurred in members' homes, as was the case with the men's club, seemed to enhance the intimacy and comfort of the discussions.

The women's club selected fiction and nonfiction books for the following year at a summer meeting solely devoted to discussion of potential books. Each member suggested a number of books, often based on her particular interests and knowledge, which resulted in a list of books representing different genres and topics.

After information and observations (such as book reviews or readers' recommendations) about the prospective books were discussed, the final selections were determined by consensus with the goal of having

a range of types and genres of books covering different topics. There was also an informal attempt to choose at least one book from each member's recommendations. Each member also volunteered to serve as a discussion facilitator for one of the books.

The men's book club consisted of three university developmental psychologists (including one of the researchers), a university English education professor (one of the researchers), a business consultant, a car dealership owner, and a retired social worker/community center administrator. The men's club members met every three months, with a dinner at a restaurant preceding the discussions. They selected books for subsequent meetings at the end of each meeting; members also volunteered to serve as group facilitators.

While both clubs selected fiction and nonfiction texts, this study only focused on responses to fictional texts because we were particularly interested in studying differences in members' ability to interpret literature. For the women's club, we analyzed discussions of *The Inheritance of Loss* (Desai, 2006), *The Emperor's Children* (Messud, 2007), *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (Hosseini, 2008), and *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (Díaz, 2008). For the men's book club, we analyzed discussions of *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (Chabon, 2007), *Water for Elephants* (Gruen, 2007), *Lush Life* (Price, 2009), and the short-story collection *Unaccustomed Earth* (Lahiri, 2009).

To determine members' responses to books prior to discussions, participants responded to an e-mail query sent between two and seven days before each club meeting that asked them to respond to the following questions related to their reactions to the book, book selection process, and potential contributions to the discussion:

- What were your reactions to the book you just read?
- What are some reasons for your reactions?
- Do you believe that this book was a good selection?
- What are some reasons that the club picked this book?
- What is it that you hope to contribute to the book discussion?
- What issues or questions do you want to raise when the group meets to discuss the book?

We then recorded the discussion; the women's club discussion of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* was not recorded because of a technical problem. While each club had approximately the same number of members present for their discussions, the time devoted to discussion varied across different books.

In some cases, the discussions only lasted for about 40 minutes, resulting in 72 turns (or instances involving a change of speaker) for the women's club's discussion of *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, 70 turns for the men's club's discussion of *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, and 66 turns for *Unaccustomed Earth*. Other discussions lasted for more than an hour, resulting in three to four times more turns for both clubs.

One possible explanation for this disparity in discussion time was that there were two fewer members present for the women's club meeting for *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Another possible explanation relates to member's engagement and understanding of the novels. In the men's club, all members had high engagement with and understanding of the popular novel *Water for Elephants*, resulting in 310 turns, while some members had more difficulty interpreting the more complex *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* and *Unaccustomed Earth*.

Within two to seven days after each discussion, we divided up the participants and interviewed each of them by phone to determine their perceptions of the discussions. Participants were asked to respond to the following questions:

- What was your overall reaction to the book now that it was discussed in the club?
- What was one thing that you learned from the discussion?
- What, if any, were the differences between how you versus how others responded to the book? What are some reasons for these differences?
- How would you describe the quality of the discussion?
- How would you describe the extent to which you contributed to the discussion?
- Do you believe that the group developed certain ways of reading or responding to the book?
- How would you describe these ways of reading or responding?

- How would you describe your own way of reading or responding?
- How are your own ways of reading or responding similar to or different from the group's ways of reading or responding?
- What are some reasons for these differences or similarities?
- Are there any other reflections about the discussion that you would like to share?

Throughout this study, as researcher-participants, we interviewed each other, debriefed discussions for verification of our perceptions, and shared written reflections.

Transcripts of the pre- and post-interviews were analyzed in terms of positive versus negative assessments of the texts, reasons for those assessments, and types of criteria employed in making assessments; reflections on what aspects of discussions the members valued; and the extent to which members benefited from the discussion and their perceptions of the value of their book club.

To assess members' degree of engagement in discussions, we analyzed the discussion transcripts according to *topic involvement*, which we define for the purpose of this study as the number of different speaker turns within the discussion of a specific topic—a particular character, event, idea, or aspect of the novel (Beach et al., 2004). Analyzing topic involvement allows us to determine the average number of turns per topic for a particular group's discussion of a particular book.

Our assumption in conducting this analysis is that as different club members contribute their interpretations on a certain topic, the more different perspectives will emerge, adding to the richness of the discussion. Conducting this analysis also allowed us to identify instances of what we define as extended stretches—instances in which members developed and elaborated on topics over an extended series of turns in ways that drew on members' different perspectives (Beach et al., 2004).

We also determined members' adoption of point-driven versus story-driven stances (Hunt, 2000) by identifying instances in which members interpreted themes or symbolic meanings of text as well as

instances where they focused on summarizing or clarifying understanding of storyline development.

We acknowledge that having two researchers as members of the men's book club, while providing more insider understanding of that club, may have also influenced our analysis of the club's practices. It is also important to note that because the participants in these clubs are highly educated professionals, it may be difficult to apply any of these findings to book clubs with different types of members.

Results

In both clubs, members' application of their knowledge and experiences had a major influence on their selection process, assessment of books, and the degree and quality of their discussion contributions, suggesting the importance of capitalizing on the knowledge and expertise members bring to their book clubs.

Book Selection and Assessment

Members of the women's book club recalled that when their club was formed, it initially focused exclusively on reading books by and about women, particularly nonfiction. The club later decided to expand its focus to include all types of books, although they still retain an interest in books by and about women. Members also noted that while they do assign facilitators to lead discussions, these facilitators usually assume minimal roles in fostering discussion because there is a high level of member participation.

One member, Linda, a retired English teacher/human resource consultant and a member of two other book clubs, noted that this club's practice of selecting books for an entire year based on extensive discussions of nominated books differed from her experience in other book clubs. These discussions and the practice of selection by consensus produced a roster that included a variety of cultural themes and high literary quality, resulting in book selections that were more likely to engage all club members.

As was the case with the women's group, members of the men's club drew on their knowledge and expertise in selecting and assessing books. They were particularly concerned about the need to select books that, as one member noted, "are good discussion books as well as interesting books to read."

At the same time, members of the men’s club recommended and selected books at the end of each meeting, with less opportunity for vetting reviews and information about a particular book than was the case with the women’s club. This led to some members of the men’s club being more assertive in advocating books without considering or investigating other members’ potential nominations. And, while members also assumed the role of facilitators, as with the women’s club, these facilitators played a minimal role in guiding discussions.

Book Club Discussion Practices

One key factor in the quality of these book clubs’ discussions was the degree to which different members provided alternative interpretations of novels. Members of the women’s club noted in their interviews that they valued sharing interpretations based on members’ different disciplinary expertise or orientations. Linda noted that “because people come prepared for serious discussion, I’ve also learned a lot through the insights and perspectives these interesting people share.”

The three anthropologist members frequently drew on their background expertise to share interpretations on how the characters’ actions were influenced by their cultural worlds and to critique inauthentic cultural portrayals in the novels. For example, Sarah, a retired anthropologist, noted that:

I like to learn about other cultural worlds—the experiences of different people in different contexts...I attend to the institutions and how people cope with that. I’m always trying to figure out why people are acting as they are—what they assume is a natural way of the world and how they deal with the conflicts and contradictions they encounter. What are the issues of power and control and adaptation?

Specifically, in responding to *The Emperor’s Children*, Sarah was interested in analyzing the cultural world of upper-middle class, cosmopolitan Manhattan and whether the characters in the novel were typical just of Manhattan’s culture or whether they transcended that culture. In thinking about issues that she wanted to address in the discussion of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, she noted that she wanted the group to “address contemporary issues such as

globalization, multiculturalism, economic inequality, consumerism, and terrorist violence.”

Sarah noted that her interest in the book stems from the question, “to what extent are the travails of its characters universal among certain classes of educated people who have pretensions to the life of the mind?” Janis, another anthropologist, responded to the cultural portrayal of women in Afghanistan in *A Thousand Splendid*

Suns, noting that “the ethnographic detail of the kitchen, meals, food, and street life when Miriam first moved to the city were rich.”

One practice that enhanced the quality of discussions had to do with the fact that because members were familiar with each other’s knowledge and expertise, they anticipated how others might respond to the novels. They therefore adopted *anticipatory responses*—predictions or rehearsals as to how others would respond to a novel.

For example, in response to *The Inheritance of Loss*, a novel set in contemporary India about a retired judge and his family moving between India and Manhattan, Lisa noted that she was interested in issues of immigration in the novel: “What responsibilities do the colonizers have for the ‘problem’ of immigration?” Because she was familiar with other members’ knowledge and interests, she anticipated that

others in the group will probably tie this to the current debate about immigration reform...I hope to gain more insight into the effects of colonialism, since most other members are from social sciences and several have lived in/traveled to India.

As evident in members’ interview comments related to what they planned to contribute to and gain from their discussions, these anticipatory responses occur as they are reading the novels and thinking about topics to discuss in their meetings. Anticipatory responses point to the importance of members’ understanding of their club’s shared knowledge and expertise shaping responses as they are reading and rehearsing potential responses to books.

Members of the women’s club valued sharing interpretations based on members’ different disciplinary expertise or orientations.

Discussion leaders drew on their knowledge of and background experiences related to a novel to formulate discussion questions.

Members also noted that having to think about the open-ended prediscussion questions employed in this study helped them to formulate ideas for sharing in the discussion, suggesting that such questions could be used to prepare members to contribute to book club discussions.

Discussion leaders drew on their knowledge of and background experiences related to a novel to formulate discussion questions.

As discussion leader of *The Inheritance of Loss*, Janis drew on her background experience living in “so-called Third World countries that have been part of former colonial systems” to focus on the issues of globalism and colonialism—“I am interested in how Desai and other Indian/South Pacific writers analyze and evaluate the role of these two parallel paths.” She therefore devised questions,

What are the issues with colonialism that she points out? Why is the judge a “ridiculous Indian”? What about the concept of biculturalism or Naipaul’s *Global Citizen*? Would Desai agree with that? How did you react to terrorism in the book?

Other members of the club drew on their literary background knowledge in assessing the quality of book selections and interpreting novels. For example, in responding to *The Inheritance of Loss*, Linda focused on the quality of the complex character development, use of historical/political events from recent Indian history, shifting time frames, and development of themes of postcolonialism.

Linda noted that her interest in character development stems from an interest in “understanding characters’ motivations and the authenticity with which they have been portrayed.” She also praised the quality of the writing, noting that the book “was favorably reviewed and received prestigious awards.” When asked what she would be contributing to the discussion, she noted that she would be “citing well-written or insightful passages I particularly enjoyed.”

Linda’s application of her literary knowledge also shaped her role as facilitator in discussing *The*

Emperor’s Children by formulating her questions based on a thematic, point-driven stance (Hunt, 2000). She encouraged members to go beyond simply describing whether they “liked” certain characters—reflecting a story-driven stance—to engaging in discussion of the degree to which those characters adopted deluded versus realistic self-perceptions. In their postdiscussion interviews, members noted that they valued Linda’s focus, as it led to analysis of larger themes related to characters’ perceptions of each other and their deluded self-perceptions—the fact that characters were often unable to be self-critical.

As was the case with the women’s group, members of the men’s club drew on their knowledge and expertise in responding to the four novels they read. Greg, a university professor of child development who also has a master’s degree in literature, frequently focused on literary aspects of the novels. For example, in responding to *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, he responded positively to the “humor, Chabon’s writing style, the capturing of some aspects of ‘Jewish tradition,’ the interwoven plot, and the reflection of careful research.”

Michael, also a developmental psychologist, focused on character relationships, noting that “I spend much of my professional life thinking about relationships and the transformations in them over time.” In response to *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, he noted that:

Being middle aged sensitizes me to issues like wondering what the hell happened to a relationship that you did (and do) value and still hope to salvage and the lasting imprint of relationships on one’s perceptions and motivations (e.g., not just romantic passion, but the love of a sister, the loyalty of a friend). Ditto the uncertainty that what you do (one’s work) is worthwhile and valued.

Members of the men’s club also employed anticipatory responses. Predicting how other members might respond led them to identify topics or formulate questions that they anticipated other members could address in their discussion. For example, in responding to *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, Michael anticipated gaining “some insights from the Jewish members of the group about their take on this book on Yiddish culture.”

Becoming familiar with each other’s knowledge and perspectives bolstered the group members’ anticipatory responses—formulating genuine questions for which they needed answers. As John noted, “I look forward to having them expand my understanding of the book. Given the respect members have for each other, you’re willing to put out your questions and observations knowing that you will receive some reactions.” However, because not all members of the men’s club were active participants, other members were less familiar with their knowledge and expertise. They were therefore less likely to anticipate potential or anticipated reactions from those members.

While most members of the men’s book club adopted a point-driven stance (Hunt, 2000), as evident in their focus on thematic and symbolic interpretations, some members consistently adopted a story-driven stance. Moreover, there was a wide disparity between members adopting point-driven versus story-driven stances. As Greg noted, “some folks are into the plot. Some are into the broader picture. Some are interested in relating the book to larger themes.”

This disparity in stances resulted in less consistent or assured uptake with each other’s responses than was the case with the women’s club. In several instances, members adopting a story-driven stance expressed frustration with their inability to interpret the symbolic and thematic meanings of the text and were reluctant to participate in the discussion, particularly when the discussion involved a point-driven, critical

analysis of texts. At the same time, these members noted that they valued acquiring knowledge of a point-driven stance.

Discussion Quality: Topic Development

As previously noted, one practice associated with productive discussions has to do with the extent to which different members develop topics in some depth through what we describe as extended stretches (Beach et al., 2004). Analysis of the average number of turns within topics indicated some variation in the number of turns per topic within and between the women’s and men’s clubs’ discussions (see Table 1).

The results indicate that in both groups, for each topic, at least three to nine different speakers contributed, including instances in which the same speaker made multiple contributions. While the amount of meeting time and the size of the two groups was approximately the same, more members of the women’s club typically contributed to topics than was the case for the men’s club.

In the women’s club, most members were more likely to consistently participate, while in the men’s group, only certain members were consistent contributors. Interviews with low-contributing members of the men’s club indicated that they often preferred to listen rather than initiate topics, deferring to high-contributing members to initiate new topics. Michael, who shared extensive insights in personal interviews, was reticent to participate because he was often focusing on the group dynamics themselves.

Table 1 Average Turns per Topic

Novel discussed	Total # of topics	Total # of turns	Turns per topic
Women			
■ <i>The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao</i>	13	72	5.5
■ <i>The Emperor’s Children</i>	30	254	8.4
■ <i>The Inheritance of Loss</i>	27	267	9.8
Men			
■ <i>The Yiddish Policemen’s Union</i>	16	70	4.3
■ <i>Unaccustomed Earth</i>	20	66	3.4
■ <i>Water for Elephants</i>	48	310	6.4
■ <i>Lush Life</i>	35	150	4.2

While there was some variation in the average number of turns per topic across different novels (as reflected in Table 1), members of the women's club typically developed topics in more depth in the form of extended stretches of speaker turns than was the case with the men's group.

We were intrigued with what practices fostered these extended stretches. One practice that fostered topic development involved members building on each other's responses by providing illustrative examples of each other's interpretations.

In discussing *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (Díaz, 2008), members of the women's group were analyzing Díaz's portrayal of the main character, Oscar, as a nerd:

Janis: I thought that making Oscar such a nerd, it suggests that not all Dominican males are peacocks.

Lisa: But in the end, he was captured by it. What he couldn't do in the U.S., he could do in the Dominican Republic. It was an indictment of the high-school system in the Dominican Republic and the U.S.

Linda: As a teenager, Oscar would have been an outcast anywhere, with his nerdy qualities. Maybe it was because of his ethnicity. These nerdy kids, some of them grow up to be Silicon Valley executives. They find other nerdy kids...Dungeons and Dragons, Comic-Con, they play games.

Marsha: I think that it would have played out had Oscar not gone back. He would have found a woman.

Lisa: That one woman just saw him as a friend, but she was a Goth.

Janis: He was a teacher; he was in a profession. He would have had a relationship, if he hadn't gotten so obsessed.

Linda: Maybe he's an example of someone who does what he thinks is right. He cared about this person. He wasn't aggressive.

Lisa: He's a sympathetic character; your heart goes out to the guy.

In this stretch, members build on each other's ideas about Oscar as a "nerd." They posit that he was perceived as a nerd relative to traditional masculine gender roles valued in the Dominican Republic and United States. They also build on each other's reasons for his failed relationships with women—the fact that, when he returned to the Dominican Republic, he became a teacher and that he wasn't aggressive.

In the men's group discussion of *Lush Life*, there was considerable discussion of how the author created distinctive characters, as well as how characters acquire insights about other characters. In one extended stretch, members, some of whom drew on their background expertise as developmental psychologists, discussed how Matty's (the main detective) sidekick, Yolanda, has the ability to empathize with other characters to extract information based on what Michael and Greg describe as "reading people:"

Frank: Yolanda is an interesting character. She can talk to some of these people and Matty can't. She can get information that others can't.

John: She gets Tristen to confess at the end.

Carl: She's an on-the-spot, turn-on-a-dime empath. She can immediately figure out how to interact with anybody...And you don't learn too much about her, about her family, about her personal life. She's kept blank...as a sidekick.

Michael: Carl, that is a really an interesting distinction, that he maintains throughout his treatment of characters—that there are people who are good at reading people and people who aren't. Yolanda is really good at reading people; Eric Cash is really good at reading people, but there are others who seem to have no way of picking up relevant cues.

Greg: Ike wasn't good at reading people. That was his kiss of death. But you know, you said earlier Ike had grown up in that environment [Manhattan], but remember he'd been off at school at Ohio State, out of the environment for a while.

Frank: It ruined him.

In this stretch, members are developing interpretations of characters' perspective-taking abilities. Having initially identified Yolanda's ability to empathize with suspects, they use that inference to compare her abilities with other characters—Carl's and Ike's abilities to empathize, and then formulating reasons for differences in their ability to empathize.

In these extended stretches, members collaboratively build on each other's interpretations by using initial interpretations of characters' traits—Oscar nerdiness and Yolanda's ability to empathize—to then explore similar traits in other characters and how those traits influence their actions and abilities. In formulating certain types of interpretations, in this case, inferring character traits, members were modeling ways of interpreting that laid the groundwork for developing subsequent interpretations of traits related to actions and abilities.

Extended stretches in both clubs also occurred when members made intertextual connections to other texts or experiences. In the women's club discussions, Lisa refers to Richard Rodriguez's (2004) *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*, as applied to Oscar's experience as an immigrant "who moves into a different context and has to reflect on their parents, whose experiences are different."

In the men's club's discussion of *Water for Elephants*, there was an extended stretch in which five members made repeated contributions to the conversation, prompted by a parallel drawn to the movie *Titanic* (Cameron, 1997). By elaborating on these intertextual connections, members inferred related thematic connections. For example, in comparing the use of foreshadowing in *Titanic* and *Water for Elephants*, members noted how audiences and readers inferred that certain characters survive at the end of the movie and novel.

Summary

Our analysis of these two book clubs' discussions identified a number of productive practices related to members' book selection processes, application of their knowledge and experience, and their development of topics, findings that have implications for enhancing the quality of book club discussions.

Book Selection Processes

One practice contributing to the clubs' productivity was their process of selecting books. The women's club's use of a systematic, vetted nomination process in which each member's nominations were reviewed resulted in a wide range of different types of books that generally appealed to all members.

In contrast, the men's club more ad hoc selection process often resulted in more vocal members having more influence on the selection process. This suggests the importance of book clubs having a systematic selection process that builds on members' knowledge and experience, as well as allowing for input from all members in the selection process.

Application of Knowledge and Experience

Another important practice involved members' drawing on their knowledge and experience to collaboratively interpret literary texts. Members valued their book clubs for providing them with additional, insightful interpretations that led to constructing new collective interpretations. For example, the anthropologists in the women's club provided analysis of the cultural settings of novels that informed other members about how characters' actions were shaped by cultural practices and norms.

The developmental psychologists in the men's club analyzed psychological aspects of characters' actions to provide other members with insights into characters' perceptions of and relationships with other characters. Members of both groups applied their literary knowledge to adopt point-driven stances constituting interpretations of thematic meanings, something that the story-driven members of the men's club valued.

Members also employed anticipatory responses during their reading, predicting and anticipating that, because they were familiar with other members' knowledge and experiences, those other members could provide them with responses to questions they formulated prior to discussions. Anticipating how other members could assist them in interpreting the novels influenced their responses while they were reading—a testimony to the value of participating in book clubs. This suggests the importance of

Take Action!

Our study of adult book club discussions has implications for facilitating classroom discussions of books:

1. Give students choices selecting books for discussions. The fact that students themselves select books enhances their motivation to read those books. In choosing one book that all members of a group will enjoy, it's important that all students in a group have some voice in nominating and selecting books; for example, nominations could include positing reasons for one's recommendation of a book.

2. Foster sharing of related knowledge and experiences associated with a book. Book club members in our study valued acquiring shared knowledge about books that they would not acquire on their own. As students are discussing a book, ask them to share their related knowledge or autobiographical experiences for use in interpreting a book.

As individual students become known for their expertise, students formulate anticipatory responses and questions as they are reading to bring to the discussion for these expert students to address. For example, if students are reading about snowboarding and they know that one of their peers is an expert snowboarder, they can then seek out that peer's perceptions of their reading on that topic.

3. Encourage students to collaboratively develop topics. To avoid jumping superficially from topic to topic in discussions, encourage students to build on each other's contributions through confirming, adding to, applying, or illustrating a topic about a text to create an extended stretch of turns on that topic. You can nurture extended stretches by having students restate and then extend previous responses to develop a topic in some depth.

building on and encouraging members to share their knowledge and experiences as essential to fostering interpretations of books.

Engaging Members in Topic Development

We found some variation in the quality of discussions, particularly in terms of the degree to which members collaboratively developed discussion topics in some depth. This collaboration was evident in extended stretches, when members initially adopted certain types of interpretations that served to model collaborative, further development of those types of interpretations.

These extended stretches also involved collaborative sharing of intertextual connections to related texts or experiences, leading to further interpretations. This suggests the importance of facilitators or members formulating open-ended questions or sharing their interpretive hunches in a manner that invites further responses, as well as encouraging members who are not participating to contribute to discussions. It may also be useful to have members contemplate open-ended prediscussion questions similar to those employed in this study to prepare members to contribute to book club discussions.

At the same time, as suggested by the disparities between the practices of these two book clubs, each book club may adopt its own unique practices relative to their own purposes that contribute to what members of those clubs perceive to be productive for sharing responses to books.

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Beach is Professor Emeritus in the Curriculum and Instruction department at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, USA; e-mail rbeach@umn.edu.

Yussen is the director of undergraduate studies in the Institute of Child Development at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, USA; e-mail syussen@umn.edu.

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