Humboldt Journal of Social Relations

Volume 1
Number 46 HJSR: Academic Libraries Creating Global Community: Operating Outside of Traditional Roles and Spaces

2024

Wait, We're Invited, Too? An Academic Social Justice Book Club for the Community (A Case Study)

Amanda Boyer
Susquehanna University

Amir El-Chidiac
Susquehanna University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/hjsr

Part of the Library and Information Science Commons

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons @ Cal Poly Humboldt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Humboldt Journal of Social Relations by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Cal Poly Humboldt. For more information, please contact kyle.morgan@humboldt.edu.
Wait, We’re Invited, Too? An Academic Social Justice Book Club for the Community (A Case Study)

Amanda Boyer  
Susquehanna University  
Amir El-Chidiac  
Susquehanna University

ABSTRACT
Political tensions, racial reckoning, and rising book challenges have led to deeper polarization in the United States, especially in Pennsylvania, where there is already an even divide between liberals and conservatives. The increasing division led two librarians from the Susquehanna University Blough-Weis Library (2021) to initiate a Social Justice Book Club. This club aimed to unite the campus and local communities to grapple with social justice issues in a safe environment. Librarians had concerns when starting the club due to the regional tensions. Still, they were determined to find a way to safely allow everyone involved to learn more about social justice topics. In addition to safety concerns, the librarians had to consider the best way to gain interest and participation in a group intended for these different audiences, such as what type of material to read, where to meet, and more. There was initial success followed by hurdles that shaped the future of the book club. We hope sharing these challenges will inform others how to implement similar book clubs at their institutions.

INTRODUCTION
Book challenges have not yet hit Selinsgrove, Pennsylvania, but are becoming uncomfortably close to home. The librarians in our area have been holding their breath just waiting for it to happen as one of the groups behind many of these challenges, Moms for Liberty, has a local chapter in a neighboring county (Scicchitano 2021). The Southern Poverty Law Center has labeled Moms for Liberty a hate group. In other areas, Moms for Liberty members have spewed racist, homophobic, and transphobic views, harassed community members, and pushed for the removal of diverse books from shelves (Swenson 2023). There was a 38% increase in book titles challenged between 2021 and 2022, and most of the books targeted “were written by or about members of the LGBTQIA+ community or by and about Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color” (American Library Association 2023a). All of this comes on the heels of the 2020 racial reckoning after the death of George Floyd and the rise of Black Lives Matter protests.

In recent years, our local area has seen an increase in hate crimes, from the defacement of our campus’ Black Lives Matter Banner to a local grocery store posting signs implying LGBTQ folks are not welcome there (Green 2023; Krize 2020). In July of 2020, this local grocery store posted a sign claiming, “members of the LGBTQ community ‘spread deadly diseases and sickness’” (Associated Press and Strawser 2020). The nearby Bloomsburg Fair made an online post mocking Health Secretary Dr. Rachel Levine by sharing a picture of a man dressed as a woman in a dunk tank; the post sarcastically thanked her for raising funds and intended to demean Dr. Levine, a transgender woman (Associated Press and Strawser 2020). These incidents and more occurred in our local area. As librarians in the community, we are passionate about social justice and inclusion: one of us was born and raised here, and another one of us is queer and transgender. These events helped fuel our desire to make a difference.
All these factors galvanized us to form the Social Justice Book Club. This book club is a collaboration between the public library (Snyder County Libraries) and the university library. It is open to students, staff, and faculty of the university and the local community. The book club aims to select books written by marginalized authors to give readers a new perspective. The meetings are meant to be a safe space for people from the campus and local communities to come together to learn about social justice issues. We even partnered with local businesses to cater for the events to help strengthen the “town-gown” relations. We hope to inspire others to do similar work in their communities by sharing our story.

BACKGROUND

Susquehanna University is a small liberal arts college in rural central Pennsylvania. Our university has about 2,200 undergraduate students. Many will remember that Pennsylvania was the deciding state in the most recent presidential election. Driving off campus, Confederate flags are displayed next to houses flying the Black Lives Matter flag. Tensions in the area have risen with the Trump administration and the country’s racial reckoning in 2020. Many residents passionately believe in the right to carry a firearm in public spaces, and this made us nervous as we began to think about our book club. Even if someone did not show up with a gun, there were other concerns, such as Moms for Liberty using this as a foot in the door to start book challenges in our county. We wanted to host the first meeting in the public library and rotate to various local restaurants. However, we also wanted our book club to be a safe place for people to learn and grapple with these issues with minimal risk. We felt that due to the ongoing pandemic, not everyone would be comfortable meeting in a restaurant, and we did not want attendees to feel pressured to buy something if they were unable to. We also could not promise security at any off-campus events. As we considered how our book club would function, we examined other examples of book groups.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of book clubs is a common one in libraries and communities. Books have always been an excellent tool for sparking discussions, and they can be a handy teaching tool when trying to bridge differences in a group. The studies we examined used book clubs for several reasons, but all had in common the desire to bring people together across differences. We were inspired by the University of Washington Tacoma’s Real Lit(eration): Reading for Social Justice, a library-run book club. The book club had many positive outcomes, such as students dialoging with people with differing opinions and marginalized students’ experience seeing themselves represented in literature (Bull and Kiciman 2021:95). However, there are other excellent models that, while not all focused on social justice, are still using books to invoke empathy in their readers.

About half the studies we encountered were from medical schools. Health sciences librarians at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill used a book club to safely allow students to explore the more challenging aspects of medical work, especially when it comes to caring for patients (Haley et al. 2019). Emergency medical interns at UCLA participated in a book club that boosted their communication skills, increased engagement with their residency programs, and built rapport with their peers, while medical students and faculty at Quinnipiac University established a book club for similar purposes (Jordan et al. 2021; Kilham and Griffiths 2017). A professor now at the University of West Chester created a book club, and students read The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks and Well: What We Need to Talk About When We Talk About Health. The professor of the class stated, “It seems that this combination of books, along with the small-group book club dynamic, created a perfect recipe for a shared learning experience where students could help one another to process and dive deeper into the issues of racism and social justice” (Rich 2021:328). In all these studies, participants felt comfortable discussing tough and sensitive topics within their book club. This level of comfort and safety is what we hoped to achieve in our social justice book club.

Of course, we are not the only organization fighting book bans and conservative agendas with a book club. Queer teachers formed an LGBTQ-inclusive book club for elementary and middle school teachers from across the U.S., and this book club enabled teachers to have intimate discussions about the stress of facing book bans (Ryan 2021). It was a place for teachers to dive deeper, learn new terminologies, share ideas, and listen to the experiences of other teachers. Library science graduate students at the University of Hawai’i at Mānoa started a book club to
support professional development, like how we pitched our book club to the faculty and staff of the university (Brown and Shaindlin 2021). Any profession that involves working with people requires empathy and understanding of others, and books can help strengthen these essential interpersonal skills. This is also why book clubs are great for college students preparing to enter the professional world. In addition to benefits to our campus community, we also found research that pointed to benefits for any community members wishing to participate.

Cognitive psychologists have found that reading literature increases empathy and social understanding (Oatley 2016). Additionally, the structure of book clubs differs from the traditional models of educational exchanges. Although there may be a moderator, each participant is seen as having something to offer to the group. Book clubs tend to be more egalitarian and less hierarchical. As a result, when care and intention are put into selecting texts, it creates a space where there is the possibility of transformation or expanding worldviews and understanding (Grenier et al. 2021:489). This collective meaning-making can be beneficial to organizations and team building as reading diverse texts “can mitigate the effect of othering” (Brown 2019:85). The research points to the potential benefits any participant in a book club can experience. Therefore, a book club seemed the perfect way to get various people thinking and talking about social justice issues in both our campus and local community.

**PLANNING**

Planning the book club was challenging. One of the biggest obstacles was determining the reading for the group. Students were so involved in other extracurriculars and already had full workloads. We were concerned, too, that students would not want to do additional reading. We ended up selecting *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe partially because it is a graphic novel. We believed students would be more willing to read a graphic novel than a traditional work of fiction or non-fiction. Graphic novels as a genre have skyrocketed in popularity. Between 2020 and 2021, sales of graphic novels rose 62% (Milliot 2022). Many of our students find graphic novels and comic books a welcome diversion from schoolwork. Combining shorter sentences with visual imagery engages the reader’s senses differently, and we felt it would be more accessible to community members, too, who may not be regular readers. Graphic novels feel less intimidating and can tackle complex topics by connecting emotionally with readers (Barter-Storm and Wik 2020:6). This emotional connection enables readers to have meaningful discussions about the themes in the graphic novel. Studies have also shown that English language learners benefit from reading graphic novels because they can contextualize language with and through the imagery (Erbel 2019). We felt this combined research made a graphic novel the perfect text for our first book.

We also selected *Gender Queer* because, in 2021, it was the most challenged book in the United States—and still was in 2022 (American Library Association 2023b). The book deals frankly with sexuality and gender identity and depicts menstrual blood and masturbation. Because of this, many groups have challenged it and deemed it obscene. However, a judge presiding over a court case in Virginia involving *Gender Queer* stated the book was not obscene and should not be censored (Tsur 2023). As we previously stated, graphic novels are popular with teens, and the most popular titles are often the most controversial titles simply because queer, trans, and BIPOC youth read them (MacDonald 2023:19). Book banning has become a polarizing political topic, and the increase in book challenges and outright bans has especially impacted books dealing with race, gender, and sexuality; the bans and challenges are framed as parental choice (Alter 2022). Graphic novels, like *Gender Queer*, are important for validating the experiences of young queer people in our country. Many queer young adults are seeking stories mirroring their experiences.

We knew this book would bring about lively discussions about the themes the author raised and the ethics of book banning.

Right before the semester started and after we selected this book, Republican politicians in our state wrote a letter to our governor urging him to censor *Gender Queer* and others from public schools. Congressman Fred Keller touted it as inappropriate even though he boasted of only opening the book and immediately closing it (Scicchitano 2022). As Fred Keller is from our local area, we knew people’s interests would be piqued by the book we selected. Our local newspaper called us shortly after we announced the book club and asked if they could attend the first meeting and write an article about it. They highly publicized our book selection as well as our reasons for choosing it to
counteract book bans (Moore 2022). The article encouraged the community to come to the meetings; however, this also led to more apprehensions about the safety of our attendees. We wanted residents to be aware of the book club, but we also did not want anyone showing up with violence or hate in their intentions.

The physical safety of our librarians, participants, and patrons in the library was a concern for us. There have been reports of people coming into libraries to protest drag story hours and patrons becoming enraged at certain books being included in the children's and young adult sections. In 2022, The Proud Boys, a neo-fascist far-right men's militant group, stormed a Drag Queen Story Hour in California at a Bay Area library. They screamed homophobic and transphobic slurs at the attendees and at Panda Dulce, the drag queen leading the reading, which frightened and traumatized attendees (Ravikumar 2022). We had to consider if something similar would happen at our book club's meetings.

When one of our librarians met with the director of our county's public library system, their director raised similar concerns. While she was supportive of collaboration, she expressed hesitation at hosting the event in their building. The library branch closest to the university did not have an enclosed room large enough to accommodate the book club, and the director worried about privacy for the attendees. If we held it at the public library, it would have to be in an open space, allowing anyone to hear the book club discussions. As we wanted the meetings to be safe for people to ask honest questions about queer and transgender issues, she felt this would make that difficult. Public librarians have been under immense pressure over the last several years. They have been threatened, harassed, and even doxed for promoting books conservative community members deem inappropriate. The public library was eager to market the program as a collaborative book club, but they worried about the possible fallout if they hosted it. They purchased copies of *Gender Queer* but shelved them in the adult section, and they are not the only library to make this decision. Recently, the Cedar Grove Library moved *Gender Queer* to the adult section after residents issued complaints (Tsur 2023). We decided hosting the book club at Blough-Weis Library would allow for more privacy. We informed Campus Safety of our plans to hold a book group and asked them to check the library discreetly, as we did not want to make our BIPOC students feel more unsafe by having a visible security presence.

Once we determined our safety plan, we devised incentives to increase participation. We provided snacks and refreshments to draw in attendees and help students who wanted to participate but might worry about missing dinner before a night class. We partnered with a small business nearby that makes specialized cookies and cinnamon rolls. The business promoted our book club on their social media pages and inside their shop. To make the book club more financially accessible, we purchased six physical copies of *Gender Queer*, as well as the digital version of the book. These were in addition to the copies made available via the public library's collection. This enabled each participant to read the book without any monetary burden. The event was also co-sponsored and advertised by our Office of Inclusive Excellence, who offered faculty and staff professional development credits for participating in the book club. Faculty and staff at the university are highly encouraged to earn credits in this professional development program each semester, so this served as an incentive, specifically to entice faculty and staff.

After we had a plan to get people excited to participate, we worked on spreading the word. We announced the book club on Blough-Weis Library's Instagram page and flyers across campus. Our university's Marketing and Communications Department designed eye-catching flyers of a raised fist holding a book to grab people's attention, and in addition to posting the flyers on campus, the public library posted it in their branches and on their social media accounts. Our librarians contacted faculty members in the English and Creative Writing Department about the book club and asked them to share the information with their students as they have many students in the program who often engage in literary events. After putting in lots of work to promote the book club, we were excited to see the turnout.

**RESULTS**

The fall semester saw quite a bit of success. The first meeting took place during Banned Books Week, and one of our librarians presented resources on the rise in book challenges to open the meeting and provide context to the reason we chose *Gender Queer*. Around ten people were in attendance, including reporters from the local paper, students,
staff, faculty, and community members. Since our university was still experiencing low turnouts to events following the pandemic, we were happy we had this many people attend, especially as it was a diverse group of people of various genders, races, and religious identities. Although we did not take a formal poll of the participants’ ages, we estimate that participants were between the ages of twenty and seventy-five. The discussions were open and engaging, allowing everyone to feel safe sharing and learning based on the group’s experiences and backgrounds. To set a positive tone, we collectively produced group agreements such as communicating respectfully, understanding that we are all in various stages of awareness, and being kind. Regarding moderating the discussions, we rotated who led them each time. We prepared questions based on the previous week’s readings, which allowed conversations and reflections to flow naturally. Preparing a list of questions prevented awkward silences and too many irrelevant discussions. We also asked participants to share any questions they had about the text or general thoughts and feelings not yet touched on. We knew it was important to ask questions about the text, the author’s story, and questions promoting self-reflection. For instance, we asked questions like: Did the author’s gender journey make you reflect on your gender journey? Yes or no, why? This sparked some vulnerable sharing, and two participants stated that reading Kobabe’s story helped them empathize with the transgender people in their lives. Two participants shared how difficult puberty was for them and how much more difficult it must be for transgender youth experiencing gender dysphoria. As participants eagerly responded to the questions and consistently kept the conversation going, we felt this was a sign of our success. It was also evident everyone in attendance had prioritized reading the book, which was a huge win given how little time we felt people would have to read the book.

Though it is still in its early days, our book club has already attracted people in the local community who have relatives who are transitioning. When we read Maia Kobabe’s *Gender Queer* in the fall, one community member and one staff member attended to help them better understand the trans people in their lives. One of our community members and staff members attended to learn more about the trans experience; both attendees stated they wished to support their trans loved ones better. A faculty member said he was attending because he had not read anything written by a trans person. He stated that as a straight white cis man, he felt it was essential to educate himself, especially since a few of his students were trans. We did not have the participants take an official survey at the end because we feared even if it was anonymous, it might make some people hesitant to return. Again, with the tense political climate, we wanted to prioritize making people feel safe and welcome. This is also why when the local newspaper asked to report on the book club, we made it clear they could only photograph people from the back unless they were one of the library staff moderating the event (as we all agreed we were comfortable with this). However, we did keep track of the positive feedback we received from participants by writing it down and had a follow-up meeting where we discussed what we could have done differently to improve the book club. We also suspect there were several more people who read the book than who chose to attend the book club, as *Gender Queer* was the most checked out book that semester. We realized we would never find a meeting time to work for all the people interested in attending, so to have more people potentially engaging with the book than those who attended made us feel like we were sparking change in more people than we knew. We were fortunate to not have any pushback or negative reception to our book club. In fact, many faculty members expressed verbal interest in attending but were unable to attend due to other responsibilities. The students that attended were engaged and excited to be discussing a queer book. We also understand the political climate in the area is still conservative and plan to implement similar safety measures to protect our attendees.

**REFLECTION**

As there are often many events and activities co-occurring on college campuses, it can be challenging to compete for participation and attendance. Unfortunately, despite our best efforts for our spring book club series, all our meeting dates coincided with other major university events. Some of these events were even required for certain students to attend, which eliminated large groups of people from being able to come to our meetings. Though we had selected our dates well in advance, these other events were scheduled after our dates had been picked. To avoid this, we recommend checking your university’s
event calendar and with groups and offices that organize regular, large events. If students have mandatory events, checking those dates before planning your book club could prevent a low turnout.

We also recommend checking for any active book clubs at your institution. For example, our university’s Violence and Intervention Prevention Center has a feminist-focused book club, which is already popular with students. This book club survived the pandemic and was still going strong when we conceived the social justice book club. Not all college students enjoy leisure reading, and few have time for it. Asking students to read a specific book and on a schedule for a book club does require extra work. Add that to another book club they can choose from, and the number of students who might participate lessens significantly. Because of this, we are talking with the VIP Center about combining our book clubs in the future to maximize attendance.

While faculty and staff were incentivized with the option to receive credits for the university’s professional development program, none of them chose to pursue these credits as there were one-hour webinars and workshops offered in this same program that did not require them to read a book or meet more than once to earn credit. Some faculty and staff members still attended our book club, but they were not doing it for credit in the professional development curriculum. Because of this, we stopped offering credit for the spring semester.

As for attendance by the local community, we were aware that when we chose to have the meetings on campus, this would immediately deter some community members from attending. Like many college campuses, our campus has limited parking for visitors. We also knew that local people may not be as comfortable coming to campus since they may need to be more familiar with where our building is. Since, during the pandemic, community groups were not allowed on campus, we realized locals may still feel that sense of unwelcome. They can safely assume there will be more university folks there than those from the community, which can be intimidating. We are sure we saw fewer community members than we would have seen if we hosted the meetings downtown. In the future, if we continue to host the meeting on campus, we will include parking and walking directions for community members. Although our turnout fluctuated, we prided ourselves on getting people to read the book even if they could not attend the book club meetings.

CONCLUSION

As we enter another election year, we anticipate increasing local tension surrounding social justice issues. Times like these intensify the need for safe spaces to discuss and learn about social justice topics. Many of our students will be voting for the first time, but even for faculty, staff, and residents who have voted many times, living in a battleground state, there is more pressure to get out and vote. Social justice book clubs, like ours, provide a safer space to learn more about social justice issues before heading to the polls. Book clubs are sites of exchange and transformation and offer participants a non-hierarchical way to connect. Our book club was both a moderated and informal space for discussion, a relief from the more structured models of academic classes. It was powerful to witness faculty, students, and community members discussing Gender Queer and reflecting on their relationship to gender. It was also profoundly moving to see staff and community members show up to learn more about some of the issues transgender people face and to attend to become better allies to their loved ones. The Social Justice Book Club brought together an intergenerational group of people who, under normal circumstances, may not have interacted with one another. Through this book club, we listened to one another and challenged each other to think more deeply about gender, sexuality, and social justice. These conversations might grow more tense as the election approaches, but that is more reason to have a safe space where such a diverse group of people can learn more about these issues.

REFERENCES


Associated Press and Justin Strawser. 2020. “Incidents Prompt Outrage Among Rural Central
mcall.com/2020/07/26/incidents-prompt-outrage-among-rural-central-pas-lgbtq-community-advo-
cates/)
Brown, Laila M. 2019. “Together We Read, Together We Learn: Examining Book Clubs as a Means of
Connecting LIS to a Feminist Diversity Ethic.” The International Journal of Information, Diversity, and
Brown, Laila M., and Valeria Brett Shaindlin. 2021. “Not Just for Patrons: Book Club Participation as Pro-
(https://doi.org/10.1086/715924).
89-99 in Transfer Student Success: Academic Library Outreach and Engagement, edited by N. Fawley, A.
men).
Grenier, Robin, Jamie L. Callahan, Kristi Kaeppe1, and Carole Elliott. 2021. “Advancing Book Clubs as
Non-Formal Learning to Facilitate Critical Public Pedagogy in Organizations.” Management Learning
Haley, Jen, Rebecca Carlson McCall, Meg Zomorodi, Lisa de Saxe Zerden, Beth Moreton, and Lee Richardson.
2019. “Interprofessional Collaboration Between Health Sciences Librarians and Health Professions Faculty to
Implement a Book Club discussion for Incoming Students.” Journal of the Medical Library Association:
susqu.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/virtual-book-club-profes-
sional-development/docview/2476545010/
se-2).
g-story-hour-protests-librarians-safety).
Interprofessional Communication through a Book Club.” Medical Reference Services Quarterly 36(1):42-
Krize, Nikki. 2020. “Sign Sparks Outrage at Union County Grocery Store.” WNEP. Retrieved July 18,
let-sign-masks/523-90a59aa5-9620-4b3f-ab7b-55ae254622aa).
edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/trade-jour-
als/librarians-strike-back-against-comics-bans/
docview/2824404868/se-2).
Milliot, Jim. 2022. “Comics/Graphic Novels Sales Jumped


