

Practical Leadership

Improving the Schools of Today

Inventing the Schools of Tomorrow

RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

Conducting a Book Study

In a Nutshell

A book study is, quite simply, a group of people who get together to talk about a book each member has read. In schools, book studies have become one tool for promoting professional learning and are most often focused on developing teacher expertise and improving teaching and learning. Book studies are useful for engaging teachers and other school staff in their own professional growth. This research brief will describe the book study process and discuss ways to assure the success of book study groups.

Why Organize A Book Study?

Learning is a social experience and most adults value the opportunity to talk with colleagues about their work and ways to improve their practice. These conversations, or “teacher talk,” are where ideas can be shared, assumptions examined, and new approaches clarified. Organizing a book study is one way to promote professional learning and provide an opportunity for “teacher talk.”

A book study can promote a school-wide discussion of ways to improve student learning and to assure greater student success. They are most successful when focused on a topic of mutual interest, one connected to a real issue in the school. Further, book studies engage staff and provide an opportunity for each member to constructively contribute to school improvement.

Responsive to Adult Learners

A book study is a very active, not passive, experience. It provides an opportunity for members to consider ideas and to determine how those ideas can impact their school. The chance to discuss implications for their work, and to connect their learning to their work, reflects an appreciation of the adult learner and best practices in professional learning (Learning Forward, 2015). Adult learners often have a problem-centered approach to learning and they value learning that is self-directed and something of meaning and importance (Rubenson, 2011). Book study aligns well with the needs of adult learners.

Characteristics of Successful Book Study Groups

Successful book studies share several characteristics. Perhaps most important is to create a climate where it is safe for teachers to candidly talk about issues, and to challenge assumptions and practices. Without a safe environment teachers are reluctant to engage in honest, open discussion so important to this sort of professional learning.

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Here are some other characteristics of successful book study groups.

- Membership should be voluntary, but inclusive. When teachers feel compelled to participate it invariably leads to lessened trust and less open discussion. At the same time membership should be open to all, not limited to selected members. If members feel left out or unwelcome, it can lead to distrust of any of the learning that emerges from the discussion.
- Have a meeting schedule, meeting place, beginning and ending time, and an agenda. In other words, get organized and follow the plan. When there is no schedule, or no set time for meeting, the group is less likely to finish the reading and hold the conversation about the reading.
- Have a facilitator to keep the group on task and to manage the meetings. The facilitator should never be an administrator and should always be selected by the members of the group. The role of the facilitator is to keep the conversation going and to assure that every voice is heard, not control the discussion or limit interaction.
- Select a book with a clear objective in mind. If the goal of book study is professional learning and school improvement, select a book related to your improvement plan. Connect the book study to a real-life issue in the school. Always involve study group members in making the selection.
- Maximize conversation and discussion but always have a focus on how the learning can be applied directly to the classroom or school improvement. Members of the group should share their insights from the reading, ask questions of group members, and identify learning from the text. Include a discussion of how to overcome obstacles during the reflection.

Other Considerations

The previous section described the basics of book study. But there are other things to consider when organizing a book study.

- Limit group size. There is some evidence that the best book study groups have four to six members so that each member has time to exchange ideas and discuss the learning. In larger groups it is easy for some voices to remain unheard.
- Be prepared to use study questions to get the conversation started. You might put three or four questions in an envelope and randomly select a question to get started. Or you might start with a chart with two or three discussion prompts and invite the group to add others.
- Use an agenda to facilitate meetings. It can be helpful to have an agenda with clear starting and ending times, a reminder about the reading and the location of the meeting. It can be distributed a day or two before the meeting as a reminder of the meeting.
- Share leadership by rotating the role of the facilitator. A book study doesn't need a resident "expert" who controls the discussion. One way to share leadership is to ask that week's facilitator to suggest one big idea from that week's reading, or to be responsible for summarizing the discussion at the end of the meeting.
- Create and use norms for the groups work. It is important to be transparent about how each book study will work. That can ease misunderstanding and increase the likelihood of success. Norms might include how to assure every member is part of the conversation, expectations about listening without judgment, beginning and ending times, and how to refocus the conversation if off track.

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Who Leads a Book Study?

The choice of a leader depends on the situation. The most important thing is that the leader is someone to facilitate the discussion. It is not about “teaching” a book study lesson but rather prompting the discussion and asking questions to keep the conversation on task. There is nothing wrong with a principal being a part of a book study but leadership should be a decision of the group and not based on one’s role.

How Do We Stay on Task?

This can be a real problem in book study or any collaborative work. But there are a few things you can do to minimize the impact. If one or two people seem to dominate the conversation try a “pair-share” strategy where you pair members for the discussion. This will minimize the impact of those dominating the discussion. Second, you will want the group to agree on the “rules” for your group. That can include norms (see above) about how often a people can speak, or the use of a “parking lot” to capture the thoughts and ideas without impacting the group’s discussion.

How Do We Get Started?

There is a lot of information online about how book study positively impacts schools. The articles describe how individual schools used the book study process. But the best guide we’ve found for conducting a book study is provided by the Broward (FL) County Schools and is one of the Florida Department of Education Professional Learning Toolkits. The *PLC Book Study Guide* is available here -

<http://www.broward.k12.fl.us/talentdevelopment/news/plc/PLC-Book-Study-Guidelines.pdf>.

The Bottom Line

Book studies are powerful tools for professional learning. They align with best practices for professional development and respect adults as learners. Book studies are most successful when there is a trusting climate where people feel safe and are comfortable engaging in candid, open conversation about how to improve their school. The bottom line is that book study can positively impact school improvement.

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Resources

Online Resources

Engaging Adult Learners - This article discusses the characteristics of adult learners.

<http://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/lt/resources/handouts/EngagingAdultLearners.pdf>

How Book Groups Bring Change – This article from ASCD describes how book study contributed to improvement in one school.

<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/feb09/vol66/num05/How-Book-Groups-Bring-Change.aspx>

Five Collaborative Professional Learning Activities – This NAESP article discusses book study and other professional learning strategies.

<http://www.naesp.org/communicator-october-2013/five-collaborative-professional-learning-activities>

PLC Book Study Guide – This guide from the Florida Dept. of Education provides a template for organize a book study.

<http://www.broward.k12.fl.us/talentdevelopment/news/plc/PLC-Book-Study-Guidelines.pdf>

“Teacher Book Talks” as a Professional Development Tool – This article provides one example of how book study impacted teacher learning.

http://www.educationworld.com/a_admin/meetingidea/meetingideas010.shtml

Print Resources

Rubenson, K. (2011). *Adult Learning and Education*. St. Louis, MO: Academic Press.

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