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Engaging Transfer Students: A Fiction Book Club and the Transfer Experience

Alaina C. Bull and Johanna Jacobsen Kiciman

Introduction

This chapter examines how our library engaged with transfer students through a library-run book club. Specifically, we examine our book club at the University of Washington, Tacoma— Real Lit[erature]: Reading for Social Justice—as a site for building community and relationships, in which students, faculty, staff and librarians connect over a shared interest in reading fiction and discussing specific content. We ask the following question: What sort of impact has Real Lit had on transfer students at UW Tacoma? Specifically: has participating in Real Lit affected their interactions with other students, their academic work, and their relationship with the library and library workers?

Throughout our analysis, the theme of community-building as impactful to a student's sense of well-being emerges. We believe that non-academic, interdepartmental, and intentional library programming that connects with a student's sense of identity can play a role in building community and belonging by fostering relationship-building with library workers and thus reducing library anxiety.

Transfer Students and the University of Washington, Tacoma

The University of Washington Tacoma is a 30 year old campus. It was founded in 1990 as a branch of the University of Washington meant to close the gap created by place-bound students who had completed their Associate of Arts degrees at one of the local community colleges(Wadland and Williams).

UW Tacoma has grown and expanded, from a class of 187 transfers in the fall of 1990, to a campus of almost 5,500 students, offering bachelors, masters and doctorate degrees. UW Tacoma first began admitting first year students in the fall of 2006, driven largely by local high schools. It has strongly remained a transfer institution, with almost 56% of current enrollment admitted as transfers. The heavy

transfer-focus of our campus' culture can be quantified by looking at the retention rates of transfer students versus first time in college (FTIC) students. On our campus, the transfer completion rate is over 90% in a six-year-to-graduation model, whereas the FTIC rate is closer to 60%¹.

As UW Tacoma continues to grow, it has placed an increased emphasis on integrating “traditional” students into the campus. This stands in direct contrast to a more normative model seen at most campuses of integrating transfer students into the more traditional demographic of first time in college students. Case in point, the web presence of support for transfer students on the UW Tacoma website is difficult to find and navigate, leaving it hard to differentiate between what support and community-building services are transfer specific.

We believe that this campus has been designed for transfer students, and that UW Tacoma is currently disentangling what that means for the more traditional student coming straight out of high school. Though Real Lit was not a program designed intentionally or exclusively for transfer students, the book club stands as a model for the interconnected experience of traditional and transfer services.

About Real Lit[erature]

Our book club—Real Lit[erature]: Reading for Social Justice—was founded in Fall 2018 and is now in its second full year. It is designed for staff, faculty, and students alike. From the start, the Center for Equity and Inclusion has been a co-sponsor and active participant. Real Lit's mission is to use opt-in, club-like non-graded discussions to create a greater awareness of the experiences that students, faculty and staff are having within our community. We believe that by interacting with narratives that reflect different experiences, the club can provide opportunities to dialogue with peers about shared and disparate

¹ THIS REPORT IS LOCKED TO ON CAMPUS ACCESS - CANNOT GET IT WHILE WFH - WILL EMAIL UWT INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH AND ASK FOR COPY/CITATION

experiences. Additional goals included creating community by reducing isolation, and enhancing campus education through peer-based discussion groups.

We were inspired by the American Library Association’s Great Stories Club, which we adapted to our own context (American Library Association). Since students at UW Tacoma do not see themselves reflected in the relatively homogenous, primarily white demographics of staff and faculty (self-reported ethnicity of faculty and staff shows over 60% white, with another 13% that did not report), we decided to primarily read social justice oriented #OwnVoices titles— books written by authors that embody the identities they write about— as a way to elevate underrepresented voices through literature.² We purchase a copy of the book for each student, which they get to keep. This aspect of the book club addresses issues of socioeconomic disparities and allows for inclusion of all students regardless of material means.

Each iteration of Real Lit has featured in-person bi-weekly discussions, and a Skype or in-person conversation with the authors. We open each meeting with a land acknowledgement, and have worked to build in Anti-Oppressive Facilitation techniques during our open conversations (Anti-Oppression Training and Resource Alliance). While facilitators prepare questions ahead of time, the group allows for an organic exploration of emergent themes.

Contextualizing Outreach: A Literature Review

Outreach, as a concept in libraries, is multivariate. Diaz (2019) explores the concept of outreach in her study, noting that its main features include advancing “awareness, positive perceptions, and use of library services, spaces, collections, and issues.” While Real Lit’s mission was not primarily about advancing

² The list of titles is Angie Thomas’ *The Hate U Give*, Dashka Slater’s *The 57 Bus*, Adib Khorram’s *Darius the Great is not Okay*, Tommy Orange’s *There There*, and Elizabeth Acevedo’s *The Poet X*.

positive perceptions of the Library, its efforts do align with what Diaz notes as secondary outreach goals: “lifelong learning, cultural awareness, student engagement, and community engagement.”

Fiction-based book clubs are in the traditional purveyance of public library programming, but they are a rare form of outreach in the academic setting. Our (Jacobsen Kiciman et al, 2019) previous research highlights that fiction-based book clubs that are sponsored or run by academic libraries in the United States seem to be limited in number.

We thus have to contextualize our work within other, non-traditional programming in libraries that seek to build community and enhance the transfer student experience. This becomes particularly salient when we recognize that “[r]egistering for classes, transferring credits, and establishing good academic standing may consume most of the time these students can designate toward college,” (Zilvinskis & Dumford, 2018) and that community building can be particularly challenging for this population (Whang et. al, 2017).

Some libraries seek to build community by creating the position of transfer student librarian as a way to create communication outlets, build relationships, and raise awareness of differential needs for the transfer student population (Coats & Pemberton, 2017). Other libraries (Lafrance & Kealy, 2017) have built the role of “personal librarian” for their transfer population, with the idea that this role allows for “the chance to develop meaningful relationships with students despite the addition to their workload”. And yet others (Robison, Frawley, & Marshall, 2018) highlight not specific staff, but the library as an institution and its possible role in “social integration[...] a student's sense of social belonging at her institution, as shaped by friendships, involvements in student organizations, and other extracurricular factors”. In comparison to the model of having a transfer student librarian, UW Tacoma has a different model: One of the co-authors of this chapter is the First Year Experience Librarian, who focuses on integrating models of librarianship focused on the traditional first time in college students.

We see Real Lit as a way for transfer students to build personal connections with librarians and peers, and thus bridge some of the challenges this population faces. So what role has this book club played in the transfer student experience at UW Tacoma especially vis a vis community building? And what sort of impact does this sort of programming have on transfer students and their relationship to the library? We share below the design, results, and implications of our assessment results.

Assessment Design

After nearly two full years of programming, we wanted to undertake a rigorous program assessment to look at what our impacts, intended and unintended, have been. This assessment is library-internal, and focused on understanding our impact and improving our programming; it is not a university-sponsored assessment, nor is it proctored or mediated by the Institutional Research department on our campus.

Our qualitative methodology was designed to be transparent and rigorous, while protecting the privacy and anonymity of the RealLit members we interviewed. We emailed all 49 past and current participants of Real Lit with active email addresses to ask if they would consent to a recorded interview.³ We received nine responses (18%), and were able to interview six individuals (12%). This is similar to our end-of-quarter response rates. The interviews consisted of a set script, and we received oral consent before recording. We recorded using a recording/transcription software called Otter.ai.

Interviews, once uploaded, were named to reflect the person's affiliation with the University of Washington Tacoma, and tagged with the order in which we interviewed: thus, 2/3/20_student_1, for example. Once auto-transcribed, each interview transcript was checked for correctness by both authors against the audio recording. Per our privacy commitment to our interviewees, we have since deleted the original interview files.

³ Note: for the University of Washington, Tacoma campus context (commuter, non-traditional students), an average quarterly participation rate of circa 9 participants is considered very successful.

One of the co-authors has worked with Project Information Literacy (PIL) for 4 years, and we built our qualitative interview script based on the model used by PIL. We further followed the work by Lanclos and Asher (2016), who have long argued that it is ethnographic, qualitative data in the LIS world, not quantitative, that can help gauge impact, “but also to tell the story of that engagement as a form of evidence of success.”

We set a script with eight main questions and a series of follow-up or probing questions so that all interviewees would be responding to the same prompts. We allowed for conversational interactions that wandered from the script when the interviewee led that way. We chose to approach these digressions as part of their responses to the questions. Additionally, since all interviewees had participated in Real Lit, we had established pre-existing relationships built on dialogue; disengaging from discussion might have changed their willingness to give feedback.

Results and Discussion

Our assessment brings a number of interesting results to the forefront that can be grouped into three distinct categories: reasons for joining, benefits of participation including soft skill building, and impact on library experience.

Reasons for Joining

The intentional social justice themes of our books stood out to some students as a reason for joining, especially in contrast to a typically white canon of literature: “It was the types of books that we were going to talk about that, you're going to read. [...] [L]iterature in class [...] are these very white culture

books [...]”. In addition, another students noted that this was a way for them to read titles with content that they might not otherwise choose to read themselves:

I think the reason I joined Real Lit was mostly because I wanted to kind of expand like my reading horizons and I wasn't generally like putting away a lot of time to read like fiction on my own, but I wanted to kind of get back into that and definitely chose one of books I would not have picked up off the shelf.

Yet another noted the importance of exploring titles away from their home communities:

And so just having like a space away from my, I guess church or family community where like I can explore those more and become more empathetic about people who are going through those has really been eye opening. And I think it's just like a really good space for, I guess students who are also interested in learning more about that.

Self-Reported Benefits of Joining

Students who spoke with us about their experience with Real Lit brought up several distinct skills that translated to their classroom learning. The first skill mentioned was the ability to hold discussions or dialogues around an idea in which other people’s interpretations or experiences may differ greatly. Of the six interviews we conducted, this theme came up in over half. One student who participated in three iterations of the book club said:

I think as far as like discussions went in other classes, since we would talk in groups, and it [Real Lit] made me, a little more comfortable to talk in in class, in bigger class discussions and that was kind of my goal in coming, was I wanted to be more, like, feel safe sharing things.

This student articulated that they saw the book club as part of their curricular experience, even though it was independent of curriculum and very clearly defined as such. This indicates to us that students are not only interested in, but seek spaces and activities that are ungraded and opt-in, but also are meant to amplify and enhance their learning. This student saw the book club as an augmentation to extant university curriculum:

[I]t let me talk with other people about ... like, have conversations with people that were about things that maybe I didn't understand but wanted to understand how to talk about in a better way. Especially in, I think

it was the fall quarter, you guys read ... was it *There There*? The one, that one. I feel like, like I'm interested in doing environmental science and as far as indigenous populations overlaps a lot with environmental science.

Another student who joined Real Lit the quarter after transferring into UW Tacoma said:

[B]ut I definitely do think the that material was important and just, you know, just...being willing to share with others, especially in my [psychology] class that I have this quarter, it's a lot of, you know, discussion based and kind of formulating questions that you would ask the group and having those meaningful conversations. And as we've gone along, people have shared their own personal stories and I've shared my own. And I think that, thinking about it now, the fact that we were able to have that in our group [REAL LIT], has really helped I think with that class as far as just, you know, hey you know 'we all have different experiences.'

This skill of dialoguing, specifically by sharing personal narratives or perspectives, is something that students are tying directly to their experience in the book club. Real Lit is seen as a place to learn and practice skills; these skills are then taken directly into classroom settings. This same student also talked about the impact the book club had on her ability to draw connections to class material and bring ideas from Real Lit into classroom conversations:

[I]t was interesting because in my literature class that I had last quarter there was some correlation between what we [Real Lit book club] were reading *There There*, and then what we're reading in class which was "The Diary of a Part Time Indian" [*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian*.] So, it was interesting... because when we would have discussions in class I'd kind of bring up ideas that were from our book, which I always like when they connect together[.]

In addition to these classroom-based skills, we also saw two students talk about how the discussions and topics of the book club affirmed their own experiences, drawing in the social aspect of the book club. One student who participated in two quarters of the book club, and identifies as a racial minority said:

I think the climate, or at least I saw the climate that this group was trying to create, was this inclusive understanding. Using literature that it's like 'Oh, I can actually relate to this,' and I'm so happy that all these white people in here are reading this so that they can maybe be exposed to something.

This particular student reflected on their own struggles as a first generation, racial minority student in a program that is overwhelmingly white, and faced many incidents of microaggressions and outright discrimination. They talked about seeking spaces on campus for affirmation of their own experiences and identity, and that this club was one of those spaces.

[L]ooking back in the past year-ish, or more than year, I think back of these positive experiences with Real Lit, Center for Equity and Inclusion and meeting, you know, Dr. [NAME] and Doctor [NAME], just these things, that, like putting them together is what actually prevented me from leaving.

This idea was especially poignant to us. Each unit on campus is focused on proving their individual worth, and what their services can provide, in isolation, to students. This statement—that our program, in conjunction with connections made through other units, is what drove retention of this particular student—speaks not only to our program, but how necessary it is to look at the campus as a whole. Each of those pieces in isolation would not have been enough to retain the student, but in concert, it was.

Another student, who had participated in the book group for four quarters, talked about finding unexpected empathy, and relating with characters who were different from them.

[S]ometimes I'm able to relate them more to my own experiences, kind of, empathize with the characters a little, like the one about Darius the Great, that was one of my favorite books, but that was really interesting to me because during that time I was going through my own mental health issues and just seeing myself. Like, going to the club sometimes I could see myself as the character even though like the character and I were different, and we didn't have the same, like all the things he was going through with his family and things, like I can really relate to that, in like a personal way.

This student talked about Real Lit being their first exposure to many issues or experiences that were outside of their own, and how they used our book club format as a model to explore academic communication habits. One traditional student noted that: “And, like, learning to talk about that respectfully and their own cultural struggles and stuff, it kind of provided a way for me to have the, like learn the language and things like that.”

Relationship to Library

Participants often were not intending to reshape/re-examine their relationship with the library, and as such were not cognizant of how this program impacted that, but when pressed on how their use or comfort looked prior to the program versus after, they noticed that their comfort level had changed.

One student, the transfer student who identifies as a racial minority said:

For me, the only change is that I felt more comfortable going upstairs. Like before, it just feels kind of like, I don't know, and then being in the room and you know, going there once a week and or you know, or every other week or it just it just kind of made it more comfortable, like more natural to be able to go up there.

Another transfer student mirrored this idea, tying their frequent visits to the space with an increase in their ability to ask for help saying, “Yeah, I, definitely like the more times that I come [to the library], the easier it is just to like, you know ‘oh like I need help with something.’”

All the students who were asked about how their relationship to the library changed based on the club reflected on the fact that they joined the club because they felt comfortable in the library already, indicating that this club was not drawing new library users, but instead created a personal connection between users and the library staff. The library became less of a space to study, and more about connection to support structures and systems.

This leads us to think that this type of program is a great way to increase the library’s profile without the more heavy-handed marketing, outreach, or instruction.

Limitations

We openly acknowledge that one limitation of our assessment is that we did not interview as many transfer students as we would have liked. We do believe, however, that the history of our institution as one *for* transfer students has created a particular ethos on this campus that is reflective of the transfer experience in general.

Similarly we are aware that our assessment participation rate remained below 25%. Some students have graduated and their email addresses may have changed, which may explain this discrepancy in part. We also know, however, that survey participation is historically low on a campus that over-uses surveys as a technique to reach its population, and that the additional time commitment of participating in a qualitative interview is significant.

Finally, we noted a distinct interview anxiety in several of our participants. Most of this interview anxiety was grounded in questions about whether identifiable information would be published; sharing our data practices was enough in all cases to allow for recording.

We see these limitations as opportunities to learn and grow from in future assessments. Despite these limitations, we feel that the data collected and presented here accurately represent the student experience in our program, and are buoyed by the richness of the ethnographic data.

Implications and Future Work

As always, the potential for future work is evident by the limitations we discussed: particularly, assessment at a larger scale. At the same time, we feel like we have a greater understanding of the value of a book club at our particular institution. With a transfer-ethos, the need for community building is evident; the book club has offered a space to learn academic practices, to push people's thinking on social justice, and to feel safe. Harrick & Fullington (2019) work on the transfer student experience note that libraries in general might be the best site for disseminating information; we would argue that it is also a strong site for community building. Drawing on the work of Lester et al. in their 2013 article on transfer student engagement, this population makes a strong connection between academic activities and a sense of social belonging, blurring the lines between the social and the academic spheres. This does in fact mirror what we saw in this assessment.

A future question that the examination of an extracurricular, interdepartmental and social justice-oriented program in libraries might be able to answer is what defines transfer student experience and success. While current scholarship highlights success as completion rates, the positive reactions to safe space-building and the transfer of skills from club to academics might indicate that success should be much more broadly defined.

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