

# HUMAN-CENTERED BOOK CLUBS

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## Third Places

We are very into the idea of “third places”. Cafes and pubs, community centers and churches, or barber shops and hair salons are places that are neither work nor home, but they are nevertheless important parts of their communities.

Even though they are temporary, book clubs can be a kind of third place. “Individuals may come and go as they please,” participating when they want. They can be “social levelers” where people with different types of work or life experience share information freely. As in other third places, conversation is the main activity<sup>1</sup>, and in the spirit of Johan Huizinga’s ideas about play, book club meetings provide “an interlude in our daily lives.”<sup>2</sup> Book clubs can be a place to play with new ideas. For librarians who want to explore human centered design a book club might lead to new projects at work. It could be a way to apply the ideas of human centered design while learning about it. An exploration of human centered design could also be an end in itself—a chance to develop or reignite a passion for the topic for its own sake.

## Why Start a Book Club?

At its most basic level, a book club can provide encouragement to read the kinds of things that its members have been meaning to read, but have not been able to find time for. As one librarian told us, “It’s pretty easy to read an article, listen to a presentation and think about it...but I think that the depth a book goes into...it gets hard to make time for that a lot of times. I like the idea of bringing in some deeper theory and experience, and sharing with others in your profession.”

Going further, the book club is a way to explore issues around the intersection of libraries and design. Our book club is part of Library UX Chicago—a local interest group that was convened with the intention of providing low-cost professional development to librarians around the areas of assessment, user experience and design thinking. Initially we thought of the book club a way to get information about design into libraries cheaply and efficiently. As the project continued we found that it was a good format for exploring librarians’ impulses that lead to their interest in design. We asked ourselves: what do librarians want from design?

There are always tensions between design and the fields it is applied in—libraries are no exception. A librarian who is interested in design will find

1 Oldenburg, R. (1989). *The great good place: cafés, coffee shops, bookstores, bars, hair salons, and other hangouts at the heart of a community*. New York: Da Capo Press.

2 Huizinga, J. (1955). *Homo Ludens: a study of the play-element in culture*. Boston: Beacon Press: Greenway Communications.

themselves working in this tension and very aware of the different practices and values from each domain. This will become evident in day-to-day decision-making. Should they think “like a designer” and recommend that a library interface be simplified so that it matches the end user’s mental model as-is? Or should they think “like a librarian,” and use the interface as a way to make the underlying structure of the library more apparent—even if it results in an interface with more complexity? These tensions are also evident in higher-level ways. A librarian recently lamented to us that she found it problematic when academic departments are reorganized in structures that seem to have been pulled from the corporate world (where many design methods are developed and tuned.) She did not feel that corporate organization supported the work librarians ought to be doing. At the same time, she felt that decision making in libraries could be painfully slow, and in these cases she wished her library could experiment with corporate methods that would allow her to iterate faster.

At its best, a book club exploring libraries and design is a place to confront issues like these. It becomes a space to imagine what it would be like for libraries to challenge themselves with new methods, and a place where design methods might be critiqued and modified to better suit libraries.

## **Design Methods**

A book club is not only a good way to expand your knowledge of human-centered design, but it is also a playground for practicing it. A human-centered approach helps us give participants a nice book club experience. It is also an excuse to immediately practice the methods and techniques we read about.

Additionally, it is a way to empathize with some of ways library patrons use library materials. While a librarian might start seeing the library as a kind of warehouse for information (complete with budgets, meetings, and staff) a patron might see the library as a place to learn new skills, socialize, or build meaning around text as a group. Our book club is a little laboratory for observing how people interested in design might use books about design.

We used three different design methods during the project to facilitate this. First of all, we participated in the book club itself. We explored the topics of each book along with our group, and considered any aspect of design we came across as something we could play with immediately in the context of the book club—the book club gives us the license to try any new method on ourselves, right away. At the same time we pulled participants and others we thought could inform the project aside for one-on-one interviews. These interviews were open-ended, and we talked about professional development for the people who work in libraries, design, and how those things might fit together. Finally, we experimented with the book club based on what we learned. We modified things like the start time of meetings, or the social activities connected with each meeting.

## Discoveries

One thing we observed almost immediately is that participating in a book club is a great way to get suggestions for things to read. Before our first meeting we contacted people who we thought might be like to participate. We discovered that they each interpreted design in a different way, whether it was as usability, or visual communication, or as a way to look at designed things critically. They recommended a range of things to read: authors like Henry Giroux<sup>3</sup> or books like 33 by Richard Saul Wurman.<sup>4</sup> These conversations immediately challenged our ideas of what a book club could be.

One of the values we began articulating during the project is that we wanted to create an environment where diverse ideas could be explored and many different options could be expressed. Like Ranganathan said, “for every reader his or her book.”<sup>5</sup> We tried to make choices for the book club that facilitate that.

Instead of optimizing the book club for what the majority of participants want, we like the idea of a reading group that changes and adapts to suit different interests at different times. Each meeting can be its own thing, with different facilitators, different books and topics, and even different start times or associated social activities. Selfishly, this gives us access to as many different ideas and perspectives as possible. But opening up the conversation like this has other benefits. It gives people who don’t often get to participate in conferences, training, or other professional events the chance to participate. This allows the book club to be a way to provide information to anyone willing to dedicate the energy to absorbing it. We try to make each meeting a welcome environment where we could approach challenging problems. Or, as one librarian put it, “if you don’t have the money or time to go to conferences, this is an opportunity for you to engage with people in a safe space. With snacks.”

## Would You Like to Try?

When we presented this project at UXLibs we distributed a pamphlet with tips on how to start a book club. You can view the pamphlet at [bit.ly/uxlibsbooks](http://bit.ly/uxlibsbooks). Presenting this work, and interacting with people at the conference and afterwards, helped us continue to refine it and gave us new ideas to explore. Thank you very much to all those who shared ideas and feedback.

We hope you’ll give book clubs a try. Please let us know how your experience goes. Happy (book) clubbing.

3 Giroux, H. A. (2014). *Neoliberalism’s War on Higher Education*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.

4 Wurman, R. S. (2009). 33: *understanding change and the change in understanding*. Georgia: Greenway Communications.

5 Ranganathan, S. R. (1931). *The Five Laws of Library Science*. London: Edward Goldston, Ltd.