The Book Club Book.

For People Who Work in Libraries and Want to Learn Human-Centered Design.

Why Start a Book Club?

If you are a library worker who wants to learn more about Human-Centered Design, you should start a book club. You will be putting together a group of people who will hold you accountable for all those design books you have been meaning to read. More importantly, you can treat the book club itself as a design problem.

You can interview your participants to learn about their professional development needs, and you can find out why they're interested in learning about design in the first place.

This kind of book club is also an excuse to explore the experience of using books. Working in a library, it is easy to start to see it as a warehouse for books, complete with budgets, staff time to track, and meetings to attend. But of course to someone using a library, a book might be a way to learn a new skill, socialize, or build meaning around a text in a group. A book club can be a way to keep this experience in mind.

We have also observed that people in book clubs tend to make lots of recommendations for what to read next; so if nothing else this should give you more recommendations for things to read.

This guide contains tips and ideas for how to make your book club a success. Ready to get started?

Reaching Out to People

You might already have a group of people in mind for this adventure. Even if you do, it is worth thinking about others who may be interested. Reaching out to people, in and of itself, is a way to start exploring different perspectives. One of the people we first contacted immediately responded with a huge list of potential books.

We talked to three people before we started to start thinking about what an ideal book club looked like to them. Each person clearly had different interests in mind, which would have taken the group in different directions. These early contacts helped us quickly imagine different possibilities for the group.

Tips
» Reach out to people in your field and from elsewhere.
» Ask people for reading suggestions right away. It's great how different their ideas will be.
» If people aren't interested, ask if they know anyone who might be.

Building a List of Participants

Small groups have a charming exclusivity. Say you're at a professional networking event. You might drop a comment about your book club really casually. "Oh yes, we're in a book club. No big deal…" At this point in the conversation you may observe the person you're talking to take a step back, updating their mental image of you to incorporate this new information. Then, almost before they can stop themselves, they might excitedly blurt out, "I want to join!"

You might be tempted to let this kind of attention go to your head. But honestly...who are you to turn enthusiasm like that down?

In all seriousness, large groups have advantages. They are open to people who may be interested, but who are not normally invited to join the conversation. And there are logistical advantages; we ran our book club as part of a local user group, so we immediately had access to a mailing list of a few hundred people.

Tips
» Enjoy the sense of secrecy and exclusivity if you've got a small book club. Consider matching tattoos or secret handshakes to really bring it to the next level.
» Find ways to incorporate people who aren't normally part of the conversation.

Choosing a Book

You won't be able to get around this one. You'll need to do is pick a book to start with. If this causes you a bit of trouble, try not to worry about it. Once the club has been running for a bit you'll have so much to read you won't be able to get through it all.

For new groups we like choosing books that are really different from each other and trying them out, to get a sense of where they could take the group. When we describe them we like to include snippets from reviews that are both positive and negative, to give people a sense of what others were saying about each book. We like the idea of getting people ready to approach the material critically right away.

Once the group starts giving you piles of recommendations you're on your own. We've heard some people complain about this problem—they wish there was a good way to manage their ever-growing reading lists. We say, just read faster.

Tips
» Pick a few books that are really different from each other and see how the group responds. Ideally, a book club is a way to explore different possibilities.
» If you end up with too many suggestions for what to read, seriously, just stop complaining and enjoy it.

Choosing a Place

Meeting in a one physical location may be the easiest route to go if you all live in the same area, are part of the same institution, or have a large group—in our experience online meeting software and large book clubs don't get along. There are a few things to consider when choosing a location:

1. Is easy to access?

Try to choose a place that either has ample parking or is easily accessible by public transit. Consider member mobility issues and look for locations that provide ramps and elevators.

2. Does the environment lend itself to reading?

Make sure the place has enough room for your group and enough light that you can read notes or reference the book. Pubs, while optimized for socializing, are often not well lit enough. Do you really want to read by candlelight? Additionally, avoid locations with live music or bad acoustics. Consider the impact on members whose hearing is limited as well.

Tips

» Be considerate of book club members' physical needs: be sure event locations are accessible to people with limited mobility, hearing or vision.

» Consider the preferences of non-drinkers for social activities.

» Be sure the location is optimized for reading!

Choosing a Time

Different times work for different people. In our city we have found that meetings just after business hours work well for city residents, who can stop in right after work. These times work less well for people from the suburbs, but those people might commute into the city for a meeting held later. Several parents of young children told us that later meeting times would also work for them because they could sneak out of the house after their children's bedtime! (We assume they hired a sitter.)

Meetings during the workday seem to be a strong option for virtual book clubs, but don't work as well for physical events. People will need to get permission to attend "training events" during the work day, as well as find the time to attend them.

Weekend options open up interesting possibilities for incorporating related social activities like free outdoor concerts and group jogs, although personally we only run when chased. We've also never planned a book club for a Friday or Saturday evening. Seriously, by that point in the week you're still eager to read? Such dedication!

Tips
» Different folks like different meeting times. Mix it up.
» Please don't call us on Friday or Saturday night. We'll probably be doing ridiculously boring, like binge-sleeping.

The Actual Meeting

Part of what a book club does is professional, and part of what it does is social. You may find it useful and fun to designate a certain amount of time for "talking about the book", in a more structured way, and then getting together afterwards for coffee, beer, burgers, cupcakes...what have you.

It's nice to think that a book club could be an environment where people decide to start challenging work projects or collaborations. We talked to a coworker who started a study group with a friend to tackle a challenging area of programming (his area of expertise) that he hadn't yet taken on alone. They met for six months to tackle their project, each bringing different skills to help the other out.

We don't think you can force this kind of thing, but it's worth it to think in terms of "creating an environment where this kind of thing can happen".

Tips
» Create opportunities to socialize, if people want them.
» If the book club generates interesting collaborations, celebrate!
» Learn the art of facilitating a good discussion. (And let us know any tricks you discover.)

Leading a Book Club

Running a book club meeting is an art. The facilitator will have the chance to learn about how to encourage quiet people to participate, how to get the conversation going when it stalls, and how to keep individual voices from dominating.

Sometimes, even if you try, you're just not going to like a book. Normally, these are the most lively and rewarding discussions. Make sure to create an environment where it's OK to dislike a book to encourage these types of interesting conversations. In the end a good group will have a productive kind of tension where members present books that challenge each other. Ideally, group members will look more deeply at material that they wouldn't have spent as much time with otherwise.

Ask open-ended questions and think in "yes and..." terms. When a group member states an opinion, ask them why they think that way, how they came around to interpreting the reading in that manner. Get inside the thought process of your group members to see what ideas they have locked away within.

Reading Lists

It doesn't stop there. Some of these people, who have somehow "done their homework" and gotten ready for this thing, will be all hopped up to read even more about your topic. For this reason we think further reading lists are rad.

Essentially, this is an opportunity to develop a library guide for a subject. A single, printed piece of letter-sized paper (our preferred format) can contain a lot of information about a topic like user experience design. Here is one of ours:

» Shaping Things by Bruce Sterling
» 33 by Richard Saul Wurman
» The Wretched of the Screen by Hito Steyerl
» Speculative Everything by Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby
» Operator's Manual by Extrapolation Factory
» Interaction of Color by Josef Albers
» The Human Factor by Kim Vincente
» Design: The Invention of Desire by Jessica Helfand
» Design as Art by Bruno Munari
» Set Phasers on Stun: And Other True Tales of Design, Technology, and Human Error by S. M. Casey

Learning More About Your Participants

We have conducted one-on-one interviews with participants to find out more about their professional goals, and how a book club might help make those happen. Although we have a list of topics we'd like to touch on during the interviews, we try to keep these conversations open-ended. We recorded all of the interviews and transcribed them as a way to help us brainstorm new book club ideas to implement in the future.

Here is how we start each of these interviews off:

I'd like to record this interview, if it's OK with you. Recordings help me be a better interviewer. There are lots of times when I listen to a recording of myself asking questions and I realize that I missed something important—this recording will make me a better interviewer.

The only people who will have access to the recording are Kathy and John. If we use a quote from you we promise not to include your name, and we promise to only include quotes that we would feel comfortable sharing in your presence.

Do you have any additional restrictions on the way we can use a transcript of this interview?

Tell Us How it Goes

Please drop us a line and let us know how your experience goes. We're always interested in learning new tips and tricks, and it's great to hear when people get a successful book club up and running.

We're also always ready for suggestions for new things to read… so please let us know what books you discover.

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