

Chapter 14

Digital and Virtual Book Clubs: Breaking the Boundaries of Restrictive Literacy Practices

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reaffirms books clubs as a sound pedagogical strategy and considers how digital and virtual book clubs may allow us to meet this globalized moment in which technology has become a staple of our everyday lives. The authors provide two examples of how to integrate digital and virtual book clubs in both elementary classrooms and teacher education. The first demonstrates the promise of cross-country virtual books clubs as a way to help pre-service teachers access children's literature and consider diverse perspectives. The second case illustrates how one rural elementary school successfully made the shift from face-to-face to digital books in order to build motivation to read and increase authentic discussion between students. The authors argue that digital and virtual book clubs can expand access to text, empower and motivate students of all ages, and mirror real world literacy practices. The authors advocate for book clubs as a necessary literacy practice, which should be part of the science of reading movement.

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INTRODUCTION

Book clubs have existed for decades in elementary schools as a means of fostering discussion about text, close reading, and response to literature (Jocius & Shealy, 2018). Book clubs, widely acknowledged as a sound pedagogical strategy, can deepen comprehension, foster the application of sound reading strategies, and boost motivation (Allington & Gabriel, 2012; Cazden, 1988; Cherry-Paul & Johansen, 2019; Gambrell, 2011). Though book clubs originated inside the walls of a physical classroom, the advancement of technology has allowed educators to extend their audience through the use of digital and virtual book clubs (Bromley, Faughnan, Ham, Miller, Armstrong, Crandall, Marrone, 2014; Serafini & Youngs, 2013; Siegel, 2012; Whitin, 2009). Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual book clubs have become increasingly prevalent (Naitnaphit, 2021). In this chapter, we define digital book clubs as book clubs occurring asynchronously online, and virtual book clubs as occurring synchronously on Zoom, Google Meet, or a similar platform.

Digital and virtual book clubs are relevant to our “YouTube Generation” (Dreon, Kerper, & Landis, 2011) as this generation is developing new ways of learning content, interacting with others, and processing information (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005; Prensky, 2001a, 2001b). Lapp and colleagues (2012) posit that the “remixing” of traditional instruction with new literacies and multimodal text is a means of strengthening motivation. Digital book clubs mix traditional instruction with new literacies. Bromley et al. (2014) found that digital book clubs allow students to delve deeper into text, participate in valuable dialogic conversations with peers, and enhance their appreciation of literature.

Book clubs have also been used widely in university settings as a means of fostering collaborative, knowledge-building, and engaging text-based discussions (Beach & Yussen, 2011; Farr & Kurtzhan-Beach, 2006). Likewise, adult book clubs can encourage sharing of and connection to individual life experiences that build community and allow members to reconsider stagnant beliefs (Rooney, 2005; Sumara, Luce-Kapler, Robson, & Catlin, 2008). Scholars note that teacher preparation programs can be fertile ground for digital/virtual book clubs and that using diverse children’s books with pre-service teachers (PSTs) offers opportunities to model culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2002; Fortune et al., 2021). While PSTs may feel some discomfort engaging in discourse around challenging topics that books may spur (Hollie, 2017), university faculty are encouraging such conversations now more than ever (Goldberg, 2020).

However, while book clubs have been widely extolled as a sound teaching technique, we have experienced that instructional time is limited in educational contexts due to policy mandates. The recent Science of Reading (SOR) movement is widely recognized by many as a move towards needed explicit instruction in phonics, phonemic awareness, and phonological awareness. However, some scholars are concerned that the movement is being oversimplified and narrowed. Duke and Cartwright (2021) note that SOR when applied only through the lens of the Simple View of Reading (SVR) which focuses solely on decoding and listening comprehension, may exclude other vital elements (often practiced in book clubs) such as the connections between vocabulary and word recognition or fluency and language comprehension. In our context we are required to integrate 23 prerecorded, state-developed virtual lectures focused on foundational skills instruction – central focus of SOR – throughout literacy coursework. Our local school districts are also purchasing scripted literacy curricula that leave teachers little room for supplemental activities such as digital/virtual book clubs and we find that students are often engaged in one-size-fits-all instruction. Despite this, in our chapter, we hope to uphold the promise of digital/virtual book clubs in varying environments by sharing practical strategies from teachers, librarians, PSTs,

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