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The Continuous Quality Improvement Book Club: Developing a Book Club to Promote Praxis

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Abstract

This article poses a model for developing a book club to promote praxis. This model is built upon a basic four-step framework for developing book clubs and includes specific recommendations to focus the book club on reflection of theory and how to incorporate it into practice. This model will be used to start a book club examining Continuous Quality Improvement.

Due to any number of competing demands for our attention, students and faculty members rarely find time to read literature that is not directly related to coursework or research projects. This often limits our knowledge base by leading us to neglect literature that may otherwise provide insight to our work, including practitioner-focused books. To supplement the more theoretically-focused literature provided in classes, additional learning opportunities beyond the formal classroom might serve to directly connect the theory to practice. While professional fields such as law and medicine include strategies like moot court and medical residencies to apply theoretical knowledge to real-world situations, doctoral programs often emphasize theoretical knowledge too heavily (Shulman, 2005). This purely theoretical preparation is particularly problematic in a time when a diminishing number of doctoral recipients enter the academy as research-focused faculty and instead turn to applied fields. As such, this article poses a model for developing a book club designed to provide faculty and students in doctoral programs a forum to explore practitioner-focused books that illustrate how people

effectively incorporate theory into their practices.

The model was identified as a proposal to start and maintain a book club for 8-10 adult learners in an Institutional Analysis doctoral program. The focus of the book club will be discussion of books from the popular press about Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) that connect theory, research, and practice. The goal of this book club is to promote praxis by providing a forum for collaborative reflection on the practical application of new ideas, concepts, perspectives, and theory (Reilly, 2008; Schön, 1983) within the context of CQI.

Book clubs allow both an intellectual and social forum for learners to share reactions, thoughts, and ideas (Flood & Lapp, 1994). Smith and Galbraith (2011) illustrate at least three types of learning that happen within book clubs: self-directed, conversational, and group-directed. Book clubs are self-directed in that they provide learners with a venue for self-discovery through examining their practices, beliefs, and knowledge (George, 2002). By discussing their self-discovery with others, learners engage in conversational learning, which is “a process whereby

learners construct new meaning and transform their collective experiences into knowledge through their conversations” (Baker, Jensen, & Kolb, 2005, p. 412). Because book clubs are informal spaces for discussion, the group directs the discussion and develops knowledge together so the book club becomes a venue for building on self-directed knowledge through conversational learning (Smith & Galbraith, 2011).

There are a number of online and print resources concerning the mechanics of starting book clubs available through libraries, online reading groups, and professional associations. Many of these resources provide similar frameworks for starting book clubs including steps such as selecting books, finding learners, hosting meetings and following up after meetings (see Hartley, 2002). In order to focus the book club to promote praxis, there are additional considerations needed during each of the steps outlined in this general framework.

Step 1: Book Selection

Books should be selected in order to help learners understand praxis (i.e., books written for practitioners with a solid theoretical and/or research basis). As such, selected books should illustrate this concept by explaining how theories and reflection on theories inform practice. Kezar (2013) warns that “few books are able to successfully join theory with practice” (p. xi), which can make selection challenging. Therefore, selection for a praxis-promoting book club necessitates pre-reading books from the popular press carefully to ensure connections between theory and practice.

There are several sources for books that are appropriate for a book club designed to promote praxis. To find books for the CQI book club, we looked for popular press books that are commonly cited in textbooks or academic journals, discussed at professional networking associations, mentioned in online discussion forums, ranked on the best-seller list, and those assigned in course readings. Due to the vast number of books in the popular press, selections for the CQI book club are books that frequently appear across multiple venues. For example, one book selection will be Birnbaum’s (2000) *Management Fads in Higher Education*, which received attention in both the academic and practitioner communities as evidenced

by book reviews in newspapers (e.g. Hughey, 2001), academic journals (e.g. Fife, 2003), and practitioner-focused publications (e.g. Pedersen, 2001). In addition, chapters of this book were assigned readings for some required classes in the learners’ academic program.

Book club guides generally suggest only choosing one book to start, and then having learners choose additional selections (Hartley, 2002). However, in developing the proposal for the CQI book club, a few titles were identified to give learners an idea about what types of books will be discussed and help inform their decision whether or not to join the club. Learners will expand the reading list based on their interest, what is read outside the book club, and newly published books.

Step 2: Learner Recruitment

The next step in setting up a book club is to recruit learners. The key to gaining interest is making a compelling argument for participation because students and faculty members are remarkably busy people who already have long lists of reading. When discussing the book club, highlight its focus on developing skills necessary to promote praxis and expanding learning in a fun, relaxed atmosphere.

Typical methods for recruiting learners include fliers, word-of-mouth advertising, and online and newspaper postings (Hartley, 2002). Due to the nature of this type of book club, there are additional avenues for generating interest. Book club selections are based on their connection to theory and research related to the curriculum, so sample chapters can be integrated into assigned course reading. Additionally, faculty may help market the book club during their classes and when advising students, if they see the benefit of the club.

Step 3: Book Club Agenda

Home and library-based book clubs generally use open discussion about questions developed by the facilitator (Hartley, 2002). A book club to promote praxis should deviate from general book club meetings by focusing discussion on the book’s theoretical foundation and how that theory is applied. To do this, the CQI book club will have a facilitator that will

prepare questions in advance to guide a more general discussion of the book's main themes, drawing on learners' interest, experience, and understanding of the book. Additionally, the facilitator will provide a presentation about the foundational theory and/or research that supports the book's central themes. This will serve as a starting point for learners to work together to clarify understanding of the book's grounding theory or research, reflect on how the author(s) applied it, and identify how it may impact their current or future practice. This reflective discussion promotes praxis by helping learners internalize theory in the context of their practice as well as how their practice can be improved by the use of theory (Reilly, 2008).

Step 4: Meeting Follow Up

Following each meeting, the facilitator should follow up with the group about book club logistics the themes identified during discussion. This step is not unique to a book club that promotes praxis, but it serves important purposes. The summary of key themes from the discussion reminds learners of the understandings created through the book club, which can help demonstrate the importance of spending discretionary time reading unassigned materials.

Learners in a book club that promotes praxis engage in self and group-directed, conversational learning to broaden their knowledge of theory and its application outside the academic context. Personal reflection helps learners internalize the content, while group-directed conversation expands that understanding by drawing on other learners' perspectives (Smith & Galbraith, 2011). Although this book club was designed for a community of adult learners in post-secondary, doctoral education, this framework can translate to any group that seeks to enhance practice by learning about its theoretical underpinnings. The authors assert this type of book club can be beneficial when learners, regardless of their background, use reflection to engage with and move between theory, research, reflection, and practice.

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