

## Case Study

# Battle of the Books: Coaching an English High School Literary Trivia Competition in Montreal, Quebec

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## Abstract

Battle of the Books is a high school book-knowledge competition. This paper describes the Battle of the Books competitions held yearly in Montreal, Quebec since 2013. The competition provides an opportunity for students who are not necessarily athletically inclined to experience competition and belonging to a team. The author outlines the history of the Montreal events, explains how the competition works, and details the experience of coaching Battle of the Books teams.

*Keywords:* school libraries, literacy, games, coaching, secondary school

## Introduction

Battle of the Books (BoB) is a high school literary trivia game that is wildly exciting and fiercely competitive. BoB celebrates reading in a fun and engaging way, while building confidence, leadership and teamwork. The game itself is simple: teams all read the same ten books, then answer knowledge-testing questions about the books. The team with the highest score wins, and goes on to compete at the next level. At present there are three levels of competition in Montreal: school, school board, and city-wide.

## Literature Review

There is not much literature on BoB-style games; namely competitive, low-tech, extra-curricular, team games in the the library. Much of the writing on library games concentrates on either electronic games, or games with curriculum or library orientation related learning goals. There is a trend towards gaming and play as a crucial component of the library experience in public, academic, and school libraries. Current trends, such as gamification and the maker movement, are examples of the increasing role games play in 21st century libraries.

Battle of the Books is an example of library gamification. Gamification is the process of including games in the library experience, either as a means of instruction or enhancing

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engagement (Felker, 2015). Though BoB has no inherent learning objectives, it does enhance student engagement in the library. BoB, alongside instructional and technological games, is an example of libraries' expanding function. A high school library is not merely a room with books and tables for silent reading. It is an inclusive, welcoming space for students to enjoy. Games like BoB contribute to a fun and lively atmosphere, and give participants a sense of accomplishment and belonging.

Among the many types of library games, BoB is unusual in its placement of a librarian in the coaching role. Some of the students who join the BoB team do not have other opportunities to benefit from a team and coaching experience. Coaching in the library has the potential to benefit both the students and the librarian: the students' academic and social lives are enhanced, and the librarian can become even more integral to the school. Having a BoB team provides an opportunity to meet regularly and form a relationship with student participants. In the process, the librarian gains the students' trust, and feels a strong responsibility towards them and their success.

In his writing on the coaching relationship, Scales (2016) describes the "developmental relationship" model. Though he is referring to coaching in a sports context, his model also applies to the librarian-as-coach. To form a positive, development-encouraging coaching relationship, there needs to be a caring environment in which the student is challenged and encouraged. The "developmental" coaching relationship that develops between the librarian and the competitors is one of the great benefits of the Battle of the Books.

## **Background**

Battle of the Books competitions are held across North America. In Canada, Battle of the Books competitions are often public library initiatives with school groups invited to compete. For example, Durham Region Public Library system (located east of Toronto) holds a yearly event with partnering schools; and Ottawa Public Library has a Battle of the Books as part of its summer program. Similar competitions are held in the United States, facilitated by the "Battle of the Books" organization in New Hampshire (<http://battleofthebooks.com/>) and "America's Battle of the Books" (<http://battleofthebooks.org/>) in California.

Battle of the Books was initiated in the city of Montreal in 2013 by Kathleen Conroy and Suzanne Nesbitt, two librarians from the Lester B. Pearson School Board (LBPSB). Conroy and Nesbitt initiated the event as they saw a need in their students that could be met by the Battle of the Books. They believed that students who are not academically or sports inclined need something to belong to at school. At Conroy's school, there were a number of students who hung out in the library to read. They would have great discussions Monday morning on the books they had read over the weekend. She knew that these students would be keen to compete and would enjoy the challenge.

Conroy recalls that the first BoB event was chaotic to organize. Four librarians directed the project, and were thus responsible for such essential tasks as getting school-board support for purchasing books and prizes, writing and organizing questions, and setting and enforcing the rules for the competitions. Individuals from the ministry, the school board, and media to act as the question askers. This first battle was very successful, and it was decided that the competition would be extended to include other school boards and become a more city-wide event (like Reach for the Top, a televised Canadian quiz show for teenagers that began in 1965: <http://www.reachforthetop.com/> ).

Following its inaugural year, the Battle of the Books grew quickly in Montreal. In the early years of BoB, the biggest transformation was the buy-in from the school librarians. In the first year, ten out of twelve Lester B. Pearson School Board school librarians participated. In the second year, all twelve LBPSB school librarians joined in. The second year also brought the English Montreal School Board (EMSB) and Quebec Association of Independent Schools (QAIS). After its third year, BoB organizers were contacted by librarians from the Sir Wilfrid Laurier School Board who wanted to participate. Also at this time, organizers asked for student input for books they would like to see included in the challenge. Conroy reports, “seeing this program grow so quickly was inspiring for me as a librarian. We were making a difference for those students who like to read and participate in something other than sports.”

In addition to being one of the event organizers, Conroy also acted as coach for several teams at her own school. The first year of Battle of the Books, the biggest challenge was juggling all the teams in the school. Conroy had four teams that wanted to compete every year so finding the time to work with them was tricky, and she had to ensure that she did not favour one team over any other. Despite these difficulties, the coaching experience was immensely rewarding. The team spirit was amazing: they designed school shirts to wear to district and final battles. Players’ younger siblings attending the feeder elementary school would express excitement to participate in BoB when they got to grade 7. Having coached competitive soccer, Conroy saw the same intensity as on the soccer field at BoB: once the competition started, participants all went into game mode and were very serious. She recalls getting goosebumps watching them.

Conroy’s centrality to the event organization caused another hurdle. As an organizer, she knew the battle questions, and thus found it awkward to coach her team in practice without giving away clues as to the competition questions. Later battles divided the labour in such a way that librarian-coaches were not responsible for question selection, simplifying their coaching experience as they did not know the final battle questions.

## **Process**

BoB in Montreal is current organized by both high-school librarians and librarians who work at the school-board level. Librarians from Montreal’s two English school boards (Lester B. Pearson School Board and English Montreal School Board) and private schools in the Quebec Association of Independent Schools collaborate to choose books, write questions, coach teams and organize the events/battles. Books are selected at the end of the previous school year, with the goal of offering an array of titles reflecting the many genres dear to YA readers, including (but not limited to) graphic novels, biographies, fantasy, and realistic fiction. Suggestions are welcomed and come from school and board librarians, teachers, and students. Selections are made to appeal to and include all readers, whatever their strength. Most importantly, this variety of texts supports one the original aims of the programme: to ensure that BoB is inclusive and caters to readers of different tastes and abilities. Book discussions are an important part of training for BoB. Such discussions help students to develop critical judgement and reading comprehension. This, combined with the necessary reading, creates stronger readers and ensures an abiding interest and love of reading.

Coaches and organizers all write questions to be used for team practice and the battles. The questions all begin the same way: “In which book ...?”. Questions are created at four difficulty levels; easy, moderate, difficult, and extremely difficult. Short questions are for

lightning rounds and long questions for regular rounds. During practice meetings coaches drill students with short and long questions to prepare them for both types of battle.

Teams are comprised of three to six students from grades 7-11 (in Quebec students enter high school in grade 7 and graduate at the end of grade 11). These students divide the task of reading the ten pre-selected books. Each student on the team will typically read at least two of the books.

If there are more than six students who want to compete, a school-level “local” battle may be required to eliminate players down to the maximum of six students. The coach may include only the most involved students—those who have read the most books and gone to the most practices. Eliminated students may wish to remain as extras. There may be as many as three extras on a team, who fill in if a regular member is unable to compete. The team nominates a spokesperson who will be the only member permitted to give answers during battles, after the team has conferred in whispers. If there are multiple students interested in the role, a secret vote will be held.

In the fall, librarian coaches buy, catalogue, and display all the selected titles. The event is advertised, and a team is assembled. Battles are scheduled, and there is an information session with the team in December. Practice meetings begin in January. If there is more than one team in a school, a school battle is held in March, with the winning team going on to the final or regional battle. In early April, students will compete against other teams within their school boards at the “final” battles. Winning teams will go on to represent their school board in an “ultimate battle” against schools from other school boards.

The battles are split into four parts: regular round, lightning round, then a break followed by another regular round, and finishing with a final lightning round. In a regular round, each team takes turns being asked a question. The team has twenty seconds for their spokesperson to answer each question correctly in full with both title and surname of author, timing commencing once the question had been read with each correct answer worth five points. If a question is unanswered or answered incorrectly, the opposing teams have twenty seconds to respond on their whiteboard, for the chance to earn two points for a correct answer. Teams have two minutes to answer as many questions as they can in the lightning round. Each correct answer will earn two points. Lightning round answers require only the title of the book. If the team does not know the answer, the spokesperson says “pass” to go onto the next question. The opposing teams do not have a chance to answer any of these questions. In the event of a tie, the moderator will ask a tie-breaking questions, and teams will have twenty seconds to write their answers on their whiteboard. If both teams answer correctly, further questions will be asked until the tie is broken.

### **2017: English Montreal School Board Experience**

In the 2016-2017 school year, Julia Stark arrived late to LaurenHill Academy, a senior high school in the English Montreal School Board, obtaining the librarian post in mid-October. The school had enjoyed participating in the battle in previous years and wanted to keep that tradition. LaurenHill is the biggest high school in the English Montreal School Board, divided between two campuses: junior (grades 7-8) and senior (grades 9-11). The new librarian was posted at the senior campus, and the junior campus had already formed a team.

Beginning mid-term, assembling a team was a daunting task. The strategy was to advertise with posters made by Beverley Graham, the junior campus librarian-coach. When this

did not get much response, Graham helped identify students who had been on the team in previous years and approached them individually. Thus formed a team of four veteran players. Shortly, two new players joined because they were intrigued by the meetings going on in the library, and wanted to participate in a competition.

Early meetings involved the librarian-coach being brought up to speed on the dynamic of the previous year's team and their impressions of the teams they had competed against. Two books were assigned to each player at this stage, which was the minimum they would be required to read and know.

As the team was forming, there was collaboration with the librarians who were in charge of organizing the competition. Coaches and organizers all wrote questions to be used in practice meetings and the battles. The LaurenHill group requested progressively more lightning round drills as they neared the competitions, and they enjoyed the intensity of these fast drills. There was an adrenaline rush, and a sense of accomplishment at beating previous high scores.

The first competition fell in March, in which LaurenHill's junior and senior campus teams, of six players each, competed against each other. The senior campus team won in a close match, and went on to compete against three other English Montreal School Board high schools in the final battle in April. After the inter-campus battle, the junior campus team members were invited to meetings and to stand as extras on the team. One extra from the junior team joined the senior team.

As the final battle neared, meetings were held more frequently at either at lunch hour or after school. The coach checked in with each player to verify they had read their two books and knew them well. In addition, extra books were assigned in a strategic manner, trying to ensure that each book was well covered by at least two players. To review their books and provide additional drill questions (as they had exhausted the practice questions provided by the BoB organizers from the question bank), the players wrote their own questions.

The team was determined to take first place at the ultimate battle, having a history of coming second to the Lester B. Pearson School Board team, and pushed themselves very hard. They organized meetings independent of the librarian-coach, and unanimously chose a group spokesperson. This spokesperson role is vital to the team, and the person must be graceful under pressure and have good judgement.

The night of the final battle, the team stayed after school, some crammed their books (against their coach's advice), completed practice drills (at their request), and had a pizza dinner. The battle was close and tense, and the team came first in the school board.

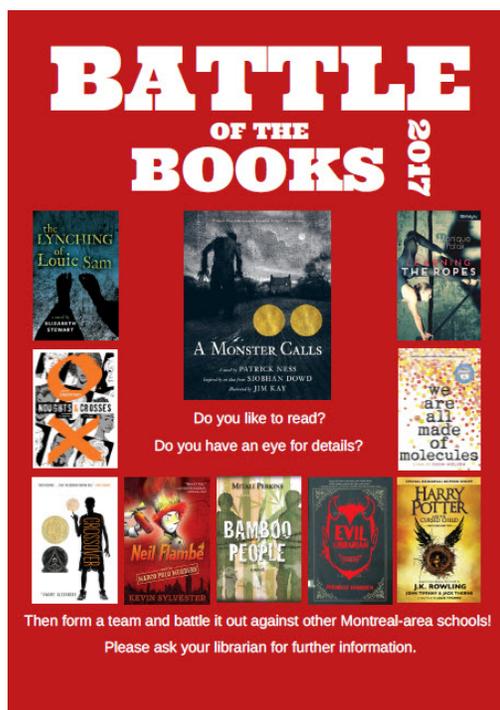
There was only a week between the final and ultimate battles, but students diligently went over their books and insisted on practice meetings nearly every day. The ultimate battle, hosted in 2017 by the English Montreal School Board Education and Technology Services department, gained a lot of attention from school board officials and local media. School board directors, commissioners, and principals were in attendance, as well as a local television station. Confident from their school board victory, the LaurenHill team was disappointed to take second place in the ultimate battle, with the victory going to MacDonald High School of the Lester B. Pearson School Board.

Prior to this experience, the author had neither been trained nor functioned as a coach in any capacity. Coaching was not part of the curriculum at McGill's School of Library and Information Studies, where she obtained her MLIS. BoB battles are in many ways much like sporting events, and a practiced coach would contribute to the team's success and ability to profit from the experience. As Conroy had noticed at the first event four years earlier, BoB resembles a

sport competition in many ways. However, Stark lacked Conroy's sports coaching experience, so the intensity of the competition took her by surprise.

Pleasantly surprising was the support and collaboration with other professionals in the school over the event. The librarian-coach worked closely with the guidance department to support the team, and gained a good deal of support from and a positive working relationship with the school administration and the school board in helping organize the event.

A "Developmental Relationship" between coach and student requires ongoing training for the coach (Scales, 2016). Reflecting on the 2017 BoB experience, and considering the significance of the coach-student relationship, the author will become more versed in coaching strategy and make adjustments in her approach to next year's battle. Most importantly, the participants need to be prepared for the possibility of losing. The LaurenHill team was bitterly disappointed in not taking first place at the ultimate battle, and put immense pressure on themselves, which their coach was unable to alleviate. Going forward, the coaching goal will be to favour development of the students' strengths and enjoyment over their desire to win. The competitive edge can emerge among members of the same team when there are more interested parties than there are spots. Alongside dealing with "losing", the selection of team members is a major coaching challenge. The ideal solution lies somewhere between testing the student's knowledge of their BoB books, and applying a "no-cut policy" (Scales, 2016, p.21) so that every child who desires the benefit of belonging to this library competition and developing a coaching relationship with their librarian may do so.



*Figure 1. BoB 2017 poster, created by Beverley Graham.*

### **Conclusion**

Battle of the Books is an annual book-knowledge competition first held in English High Schools in Montreal in 2013. The first battle involved teams in the Lester B. Pearson School Board, and quickly grew to involve many schools from within that school board, as well as private schools and schools from the English Montreal School Board. The popularity of the event underscores the relevance of school libraries in the 21st century, specifically with respect to the trend towards gaming in libraries and the value of the librarian-as-coach.

### **References**

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### **Acknowledgments**

The Montreal Battle of the Books takes place thanks to the hard work and dedication of the following individuals. This is not a complete list, as the event's success relies on the organization, input, and time of many individuals in the schools, the school boards, and the community.

- From the Lester B. Pearson School Board: Suzanne Nesbitt, Carol Ann Case, Andrea Hyde, and especially Kathleen Conroy, who began BoB in Montreal and contributed her story for this article.
- From the English Montreal School Board: Annette MacIntyre, Paul Grewal, Stephanie Germain, Danielle Juneau, Beverley Graham, Debra French, Yvette Bailey, Anna Supino.
- From the Quebec Association of Independent Schools: Laura Sanders, Molly Richter.
- Community Support: Prizes were generously donated by local independent booksellers Librairie Drawn and Quartely, Librairie Monet, Paragraphe Books, Babar Books, EduReference, Scholastic.