When Oprah Winfrey began her successful book club in 1996, she continued a tradition that public libraries have provided for decades. Oprah placed a spotlight on reading that encouraged many women who had never read a book to read. Book clubs sprang up in neighborhoods, bookstores, and on Web sites.

Library media centers began offering book clubs, too. However, some of these book clubs didn’t necessarily follow the traditional pattern of selecting one book, reading it, and discussing it with the students. Because students usually vary in their reading skills and interests, selection of one book could be difficult. Some media specialists cracked the book club template to include reluctant readers, second-language students, and special students. They used a wide variety of programs and techniques to capture the reading interests of young students in the book club. This article describes a variety of flexible ways to develop a book club that can suit its members’ needs.

Perhaps the first challenge is for media specialists to convince themselves that starting a book club is a worthwhile and rewarding project. Certainly a book club serves as an image booster for the media center. Thanks to Oprah, the term “book club” has a positive spin that encourages recreational reading and interaction with other readers. Also, the setting brings students into the media center to build a positive relationship with the media specialist.

However, many media specialists believe they do not have the time, money, administration support, or student interest to run a successful book club. Let’s run down these objections and see how valid they are:

**Lack of Time**

Many media centers have few or no library aides to help with normal library functions and taking on another task seems overwhelming. But book clubs can be scheduled to fit into any time of day: homeroom mornings or afternoons, lunches, or activity times. The length of time is unimportant. If the time is only twenty minutes, that time is spent on reading. What could be more educational (and enjoyable) than that? According to scholars Ribovich and Erickson, lifelong readers usually develop the reading habit before adulthood. Book clubs connect book lovers with books and readers, encouraging these young students to become lifelong readers.

**Lack of Money**

Book clubs in the media center do not require large budgets. In fact, depending on the goals of the book club, a book club can run cost-free. For example, if one of the goals were to encourage reading at all reading levels, then multiple copies of books would not need to be purchased. Instead, the leader would booktalk a wide range of material in the media center, including nonfiction and magazines. After booktalks, time is left for checkouts and reserves. The book club becomes a cost-free program with high library circulation. These statistics might be helpful if there is any discussion of cuts in the library budget.

**Lack of Administration Support**

In 2002 the No Child Left Behind Law contributed to many teachers struggling and competing for attention to their programs. During lean times media specialists may need to provide a popular program that serves as good public relations. Based on studies performed in several states by Keith Curry Lance and others, reading achievement increases when students have access to well-developed media collections. A book club in the media center is a user-friendly way to approach students that destroys the myth of the unfriendly, unapproachable librarian.

**Lack of Student Interest**

As Oprah Winfrey discovered, lack of interest is just an excuse. Readers will always read whatever interests them. This includes readers that struggle to read, those that don’t like to read, and those that read skillfully. If a book is a perfect match with a reader that reader will continue to read, and reading will increase reading comprehension. Stephen Krashen reports the more reading one does, the more skilled one becomes at reading. A media specialist’s job is to provide materials of interest to the students. A book club can do that, especially a flexible club that accepts all levels of readers and reading materials.

Hopefully, some of your trepidation about starting a book club is dissolving. Then other questions arise. What kind of book club? That depends on the students’ reading levels and reading interests. These issues can be resolved at the first meeting through a brief written questionnaire asking the students to list their favorite books, authors, and genres.

By Carol Littlejohn

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Also, the questionnaire could list suggestions of additional club activities beyond selecting a group novel to read: Reader’s Theater, newsletter, poetry reading, field trip, writer’s forum, and an online discussion group. Ask the students to rate the activities in which they want to participate. If the questionnaires seem to reflect a wide range of reading levels and interests, perhaps the best way is to let students select their own books to read.

One librarian in Texas, Sara Stevenson, ate lunch every day with her students at Austin’s O. Henry Middle School to learn their reading tastes. She hosted several book clubs after lunch: Monday was horror, Tuesday was fantasy, Wednesday was mystery, and Thursday was for eighth graders called Girls’ Time Out. Library circulation increased from 241 books a month to more than double the previous year’s—in part, because Stevenson bought reading materials that the students’ recommended.

Stevenson understood the importance of having high-interest reading materials in the library. Another important factor in book clubs is the interaction with other readers. As students read their self-selected books, they should be given the opportunity to share their books with others. According to unpublished dissertations by Joni Bodart and Gail Reeder, booktalking—especially “peer booktalking”—is extremely successful with students. A book club leader might need to provide a quick primer course on booktalking, but most students are enthusiastic learners and participants. However, since many readers are shy and introverted, the leader should be sensitive to any member who chooses not to participate in any booktalks or discussions. It’s okay for any member just to listen. As they become more comfortable, members may decide to participate later.

As many book clubs leaders discover, each club evolves based on the members’ needs and the leader’s goals. For example, in 2000-2001 a multicultural book club was formed in an elementary school in Fairfax County, Virginia. Every two weeks about 11 second-language students read a selection of high-interest English books with hands-on activities. The goal was to improve the students’ English and to increase their enjoyment of reading. In a nine-month study, Miller and Ogranovitch reported 75% of the participants either increased their enjoyment for leisure reading or stayed the same. They also spent more time reading independently and increased their English vocabulary. More importantly, these students learned that reading can be fun.

For five years this author’s goal was similar in initiating a book club in a middle school library outside Pittsburgh, PA. The first goal was to increase the enjoyment of recreational reading with the secondary hope that reading comprehension would improve. During the first couple of years the book club had about 50 members and met each week for about thirty minutes in the library during homeroom mornings. Booktalks began each session and, due to financial constraints, the members selected reading materials (including magazines and audiobooks) from the library. Also, the club participated in an interactive mystery game, Reader’s Theater, writing workshop, and several field trips. By the third year the size grew to over 200 students so that members from each of the three grades met at lunch in the library bimonthly. Eventually membership became limited due to number of seats within the library. Students learned that they must sign up early in the school year to belong to the book club since space was limited. Suddenly and unexpectedly, it became popular to belong to the book club. Library circulation increased each year (both in fiction and nonfiction) and the reading comprehension scores at the school improved each year. Did the book club make a difference? It certainly contributed to the positive image of reading at an age when reading and libraries are not considered “cool.”

Oprah did her part by making book clubs popular. Now library media specialists can expand the concept of the book club by setting its goals and those goals have no limits. This gives a flexibility that no librarian can resist. With the additional benefit of a good public image for the media center, you might be tempted to give book clubs a try.

The Oprah Revolution might be coming to your school and you just might be the person initiating it!

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Bibliography


