

# Using Book Clubs to Engage Students, Activate Prior Knowledge, and Transfer Learning Across Contexts

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## Brief Description and Purpose of Activity

In recent years, I've implemented a book club component in approximately 35 sections of my undergraduate introductory, developmental, and educational psychology courses. Over these semesters, my guidelines have changed and adapted to create what I believe is an optimal book club experience that is worthy of class time. In what follows, I'll identify other literature about book clubs in higher education, outline my approach to in-class book clubs in developmental courses, and share some examples of student work and feedback.

## Background and Rationale

Book clubs are small groups of peers who meet regularly to discuss a particular book. They are popular both in education settings, where they're sometimes called "literature circles" (particularly in K-12 literature; Boudreau, 2021), and in social groups. In recent decades, book clubs have remained popular at the encouragement of celebrities who curate lists of their book suggestions (including Reese Witherspoon, Mindy Kaling, and Emma Watson; Millar, 2024).

Within higher education, book clubs are used for a variety of purposes, including to promote students' empathy (e.g. Sylvan, 2019), to increase cultural competency and group collegiality (e.g. Furniss & Motts, 2007), and to make theoretical concepts from a textbook more practical and approachable (e.g. Wyant & Bowen, 2018). They have been used in many different disciplines, including business (Kimball, 2007; Peebles, 2008; Switzer & Barclay, 2012), communication science (Sylvan, 2018; Sylvan, 2019), computer science (Gulati, 2021; VanDeGrift, 2024), correctional education (Geraci, 2003), engineering (Gulati, 2021), English (Addington, 2001), family science and human development (Vaterlaus et al., 2019), health studies (Jensen & Stark, 2022; Zerden et al., 2021), math (Munakata, 2005), medicine (Barry et al., 2017; Griffard et al., 2013; Gupta et al., 2000; Henderson et al., 2020; Ney et al., 2023; Prabhakar & MacLean, 2021; Schulte et al., 2023; Timm, et al., 2014; Verran, 2019), nursing (Butell et al., 2004; Harding, 2017; Larocque et al., 2014; Stiegler et al., 2023), pharmacy (Chappell & Dervay, 2016; Malcom, 2018; Mathias, 2015; Plake, 2010; Sullivan et al., 2022), political science (Cooper, 2019), social work (Zerden et al., 2021), sociology (Lewis, 2004; Wyant & Bowen, 2018), teacher education (Broemmel et al., 2022; Burbank et al., 2011; Correia & Boivin, 2023; Davis & Bush, 2021; Ervin & Gannon, 2022; Falter & Eagle, 2023; Hales et al., 2021; Hall, 2009; Homes et al., 2021; Lassonde et al., 2005; Reilly, 2008; Robertson & Smith, 2017; Smith et al., 2017), and women's studies (Bondy, 2015).

As open-ended, student-led activities, book clubs embody constructivist learning. Without just one accepted definition, "constructivism" can describe a philosophy, an ontology, or an epistemology (Maddux & Cummings, 2008). Regardless, it is rooted in the developmental theories of Piaget and Vygotsky, staples in the developmental psychology canon. Educational scholars and practitioners also connect components of constructivist classrooms to Piaget and Vygotsky, including encouraging student autonomy, allowing student questions and interests to drive content and activities, and creating opportunities for students to dialogue with each other.

When a teacher explicitly makes these connections clear to students, participation in a book club can help them to see practical applications of these theories.

## Why Book Clubs?

In addition to a textbook, my courses use popular non-fiction books in the social sciences by researchers such as Alison Gopnik or Laurence Steinberg, or by science journalists for major publications like *The Atlantic* or *Vox*. Table 1 lays out my rationale and goals in including these popular press books through the book club model.

*Table 1. Learning Goals for Book Clubs*

<i>To encourage active reading</i>	Anecdotal reports and empirical research indicate that college students are not adequately reading their assigned texts, if they are reading them at all (Berrett, 2013; Berry et al., 2010; Brost & Bradley, 2006; Clump, et al., 2004; Deale & Lee, 2022; Del Principe & Ihara, 2016; Hoeft, 2012; Howard et al., 2018; Kerr & Frese, 2017; Schnee, 2018). I have noticed a reluctance to read on the part of our students, as have my colleagues. My goal with using popular books is to encourage students to slow down, become engaged, and pay attention to the act of reading.
<i>To have students experience constructivist learning</i>	Constructivism in education is rooted in the ideas of Piaget and Vygotsky, important theorists in the content of any developmental psychology course. Experiencing a constructivist learning environment is part of the content of our field.
<i>To promote transfer of concepts from one area to another</i>	Transfer of learning, or the ability to identify or use skills or information that is learned in one situation in a new situation, is difficult to teach and to demonstrate empirically (Perkins & Salomon, 1992). The culminating assignment of book club, to find connections between class or textbook content and the book club reading, helps students practice transfer.

## Book Considerations and Choices

In the table in the appendix, I describe many of the books that I've used repeatedly in courses in developmental psychology. Of course, not all students have enjoyed their chosen book, but the ones in the table are those that have survived at least one test run and continue to be options, depending on the course and semester. To survive a test run, I need to see that the students are engaged in the material, report that they find the book interesting, and can show meaningful connections to the concepts and ideas we cover in class.

When choosing books, I first skim and then read each for suitability in terms of accuracy, readability, length, and how clearly the content relates to topics in my developmental courses. Table 2 outlines how I think about these four considerations.

*Table 2. My Considerations for Choosing a Book*

<i>Readability</i>	I promise students at the beginning of the semester that I will never choose a book that I didn't enjoy or can't envision students enjoying. If it wouldn't be sold in an airport bookstore or would be too dense to read on a beach, then I won't choose it. This is in line with my goal of making reading engaging and providing content that students want to think about – thereby encouraging students to make connections from the reading both to their own lives and to course content.
<i>Accuracy</i>	In a college course, accurate portrayal of findings (over simplistic headlines that forgo subtlety) is important. I accept that, as popular press publications, there will be some amount of "watering down." I also accept that I am not an expert in all of the topics my readings cover.
<i>Length</i>	I try to choose books that are all similar in length so that students do not choose by length, and to keep workload fair. This is not always easy, and I have had to put aside suitable, but lengthy, options for that reason.
<i>Relationship to Course Material</i>	The primary goal of this assignment is to promote transfer – making connections between multiple sources of information from various places. The books that I choose need to have both fairly obvious and more abstract connections with class or textbook content in order to make the list of book options.

## Book Club Procedures

At the start of the semester, students receive a list of the three or four book options. The list contains links to reviews on Amazon and Goodreads and a file with the first few pages of each book so students can individually sample each author's writing style and make an informed choice.

Based on their book preferences, students are assigned to clubs of about five students, and they remain in these groupings for the semester. Because it is crucial that club members are friendly with one another to have meaningful conversations that last for the whole semester, the first meeting includes only ice breaker activities and exchanging of contact information. Additionally, at the start of the semester, students complete surveys with the option to request with whom they do or do not want to work, to maximize chances of book clubs, and all other small group work in the class, being cohesive and talkative.

Book clubs meet once every other week, at the end of a unit, for about 30 minutes, meaning that we dedicate less than 10% of total class time to book club. My class sections average 30 students each, and I usually request large classrooms because of the significant amount of group work that is present in my teaching. For book clubs, students often set up nearby, outside the classroom on benches or in lounges, in order to minimize the amount of ambient noise. I prioritize students with hearing or attentional deficits for the quietest spots.

Before coming to class, each student is expected to have read the assigned chapters for that meeting and to prepare three discussion questions for the group. At the start of each club meeting, I randomly assign one student per club to be that day's leader. Being leader comes with the responsibility of making sure the conversation doesn't peter out, and to take notes about the meeting, which they turn in to me following the meeting.

Creating discussion questions that elicit good conversation is a difficult task for my undergraduates and this needs to be explicitly taught. Usually, I give students minimal

instructions for their first experience creating discussion questions, allowing them to experience how hard it is and what happens in the meeting when the questions are not good. Students are then ready to listen when I give them specific pointers after that first meeting. Some of the material that I use when discussing how to create good questions can be found in the appendix.

## Assessment

Throughout the semester, I formally assess book club questions (by comparing written submissions to the characteristics of good questions that we go over in class and are located in the appendix). For the first few meetings, I grade these with comprehensive written feedback and when students have improved, I mark them as complete/incomplete. I informally assess engagement and participation by circulating from club to club during meetings to listen to and add to the conversations. I have never felt the need to assign a numerical value to book club meeting participation, as most times, if I suspect a student is not prepared or is bluffing their way through a meeting, this usually improves after a private conversation with the student.

In a final summative assignment, I ask students to articulate 20 connections, in which they explain a concept or idea that is present in both contexts (book club and class/the text), and how the pairs of references relate to each other. This forces students to look for opportunities of transfer in learning. I assess each entry on three questions, which I share with the students: 1. Do I understand how the concept is discussed in your book club book? 2. Do I understand how the concept is discussed in the textbook or during class? 3. Do I understand how these two instances are clearly related?

What follow are unedited examples of submitted student connections.

Gray discusses fantasy games in his book *Free to Learn*. Children engage in fantasy play when they invent scenarios and act them out rationally (Gray, 124). Around the age of four, children will collaborate to create various scenarios, according to the textbook, which demonstrates the maturation of their theory of mind (Belsky).

On page 87 of our textbook, it mentions depth perception and the visual cliff. Depth perception is defined as the ability to see and fear heights, and the visual cliff is defined as the end point. For example, two researchers tested depth perception in babies and referred to the end of the table as the end point (Belsky, 2017). On page 92 of *The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog*, Perry compares depth perception loss to a kitten that, for the first few weeks of its life, has one eye closed, and when it finally opens, the kitten is blind even though the eye is completely normal (Perry, 2006). Both Perry and Belsky explained depth perception, with Belsky providing readers with a straightforward answer and Perry explaining it in a way in which depth perception would be damaged.

Chapter 5 tells the story of Leon, who was neglected from an early age while his brother received all of his mother's attention (Perry & Szalavitz, p. 122). His early infancy lacked both emotional and social development. This connects to chapter 4 of the textbook, specifically attachment styles. At first, Leon would cry when his mother would leave him, but he eventually began to self-soothe and ultimately had no reaction when his mother would leave or come back. Leon shows signs of an avoidant attachment due to his emotionless reactions (Belsky, p. 109).

The text describes two different effective standardized tests that are commonly used in our society, Intelligence Quotient (IQ) and Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC) (Belsky, p. 205). The IQ test is used to measure an individual's cognitive academic ability and the WISC measures a child's performance and five different basic

categories (Belsky, p. 205). *The Gardener and the Carpenter* takes a different stance on standardized testing, emphasizing that children should not take standardized tests and tests should be more geared towards “exercising their continuing capacities for discovery” (Gopnik, p. 196).

In the Spring 2024 semester, I gave a brief, informal, anonymous survey using Mentimeter in three class sections (two in Child Development and one in Lifespan Development) on the optional last day of class, including two questions about the students’ book club. Out of the 58 students who were present (of 89 enrolled students), 45 (or 77%) responded positively when asked if they read more of their book club book than they usually read in reading assignments. When presented with options of “yes, entirely”, “yes, mostly”, “yes, some”, or “no, not really” to the prompt, “I read my book club book”, 43 students (or 72%) responded with entirely or mostly.

Of course, conclusions that can be drawn from this informal survey are very limited – students may have responded more positively because of my presence in the room, and attendance on the last day of class has been lower than usual, etc. However, these positive findings suggest that further, more formal research is warranted to study the effectiveness of a book club model in promoting engagement in reading and ability to transfer learning across contexts.

## Lessons Learned

Over the semesters, I’ve changed several aspects of this assignment to improve what I saw as shortcomings. Each semester looks a little different as I make improvements. Initially, I made time for book club every week of the semester, which proved to be too much time for some students. I am happy with the current time ratio. Book options come and go, and I respect when students tell me they’re not enjoying a book. I’ve come to eliminate some options, though I really enjoy them and see their benefit. This semester, I’ve done away with the leader writeup paper (and leaders all together) to see what happens. I suspect having to take notes might sometimes be constraining the conversation.

I similarly prioritize being flexible within the moment. I once allowed a group to swap their book entirely a few weeks in, since they were having such a hard time relating to their choice. In this current semester, I’ve invited members of our campus community (faculty, staff, and administrators) to join a club and come to class during meeting times. I’m hoping this helps provide students with a more mature perspective in their conversations.

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## Appendix A: Hogan

### Common Characteristics of Good Discussion Questions

For more examples, visit the slides [here](#).

<i>Have a Set up</i>	You can assume we've read the chapter, but try to also assume we're forgetful, or that it's been a while since we read it. Give us some background information so we understand where your question is coming from. If there's a particular, meaningful quote that you want to discuss, pull it out directly.
<i>Pose Big Issues</i>	Take a small idea or practical finding from a study in the reading and apply it to the real world. Ask what that would look like.
<i>Go Beyond Recall</i>	If you want us to recount something factual, also ask us something about it that goes deeper. What was your reaction to this? Did this surprise you? How does what he said contradict this other thing he said in the previous chapter? DON'T: Ask our opinion on a fact. Opinions don't change facts or research findings. (You could ask us if something surprised us, though, or if we can think of any counterevidence.)
<i>Clear up Confusions</i>	Ask, specifically, about something you didn't understand in the chapter so that your groupmates can help.
<i>Relate to Ideas from Class</i>	Find ways to connect what you're reading to concepts from psychology and ask or point them out in your question.

## Appendix B: Hogan

### Selections for Book Clubs

<a href="#"><u><i>A Book about Love</i></u></a>	<a href="#"><u>Jonah Lehrer</u></a> , independent science journalist*	Lifespan - Ainsworth, attachment theory (comprehensive), attunement, behaviorism, Bowlby, comparative psychology, cross cultural differences, divorce, evolutionary psychology, Frankl, Gottman, Harlow, marriage, love, neuroscience, parenting, relationships, religion, sex, Watson
<a href="#"><u><i>Age of Opportunity: Lessons from the New Science of Adolescence</i></u></a>	<a href="#"><u>Laurence Steinberg</u></a> , Professor of Psychology & Neuroscience, Temple University	Adolescence – criminal justice, delayed adulthood, executive functioning, juvenile incarceration, marshmallow task, mental health, motivation, neuroscience, parenting advice, parenting styles, peer relationships, plasticity, puberty, risk-taking, self-regulation, schools, teenage pregnancy
<a href="#"><u><i>All Joy and No Fun: The Paradox of Modern Parenting</i></u></a>	<a href="#"><u>Jennifer Senior</u></a> , Pulitzer Prize-winning staff writer at <i>The Atlantic</i>	Lifespan/Adulthood – flow, gender roles, grandparents, harms of social media, helicopter parents, history of perceptions of childhood, identity, marriage, mindfulness, other social sciences, overscheduling, parenting, positive psychology, rise of indoor play, self-consciousness, sex, transitions of adolescence, working parents
<a href="#"><u><i>Free to Learn: Why Unleashing the Instinct to Play Will Make our Children Happier, More Self-reliant, and Better Students for Life</i></u></a>	<a href="#"><u>Peter Grey</u></a> , Research Professor of Psychology & Neuroscience, Boston College	Childhood – age mixing, alternative schools, anthropology, Bruner, critique of schools, cross-cultural psychology, evolutionary psychology, history of education, hunter-gatherers, impact of historical cohort, overscheduling, parenting types, play, psychological disorders, positive psychology, social skills, Vygotsky
<a href="#"><u><i>Generations: The Real Difference between Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, Boomers, and Silents – and What They Mean for America’s Future</i></u></a>	<a href="#"><u>Jean Twenge</u></a> , Professor of Psychology, San Diego State University	Lifespan - collectivism, delayed adulthood, divorce, drug use, gender roles, gender inequality, graph reading, identity, impact of historical cohort, impact of media, income inequality, individualism, LGBTQIA+ attitudes, locus of control, marriage, mental health trends, perceptions of gender, physical health, political polarization, political trends, pop culture, racism, religion, self-perception, social justice, technology, trends in sexual behavior
<a href="#"><u><i>Love at Goon Park: Harry Harlow and the Science of Affection</i></u></a>	<a href="#"><u>Deborah Blum</u></a> , Pulitzer Prize-winning independent science journalist	Lifespan – Ainsworth, attachment theory, behaviorism, Bowlby, comparative psychology, evolutionary theory, Freud, gender inequality, Harlow, intelligence testing, learning, Little Albert, Maslow, research ethics, research/lab startup, parent-child relationships, Pavlov, primate behavior, psychology as a science, Skinner, Strange Situation, Terman, Thorndike, Watson
<a href="#"><u><i>The Boy who was Raised as a Dog: What</i></u></a>	<a href="#"><u>Bruce Perry</u></a> , MD an academic in children’s	Childhood – adoption trauma, brainwashing, brain development, cPTSD, critical periods,

<p><u><i>Traumatized Children can Teach Us about Loss, Love, and Healing</i></u></p>	<p>mental health &amp; <u>Maya Szalavitz</u>, independent neuroscience journalist</p>	<p>cults, dissociation, drug use, false confessions, gender roles, language development, learned helplessness, mind-body connection, neglect, neuroscience, plasticity, play, pruning, PTSD, psychiatric medications, self-harm, sexual abuse, social work, sociopathy, stress response, theory of mind, trauma, therapy, therapeutic boundaries</p>
<p><u><i>The Gardener and the Carpenter</i></u></p>	<p><u>Alison Gopnik</u>, Professor of Psychology and Affiliate Professor of Philosophy, University of California, Berkeley</p>	<p>Lifespan/Adulthood – ADHD, adolescence, behavioral genetics, brain development, childhood, comparative psychology, evolutionary perspective, imitation, grandparents, maternal love and childbirth, pair-bonding, parenting, philosophical perspective, play, role of community in childcare, role of language on development, school readiness, social commitment, social learning, technology</p>

\*Jonah Lehrer was found to plagiarize and fabricate information in some of his early books. This book was written after that became public. I know of no criticism about the veracity of this book.