

Engage your Learning Community with an Online Book Club

OUR STORY

The BCcampus Online Book Club was a microlearning event offered over nine weeks from September 10 - November 12, 2018. Our primary target audiences were faculty and instructors and ed developers in B.C., but all interested individuals were welcome to participate. Our main purpose was building community amongst post-secondary teaching and learning colleagues while learning and revisiting the principles in the book "[How Learning Works: Seven Research-based Principles for Smart Teaching](#)" by Susan A. Ambrose, Michael W. Bridges, Michele DiPietro, Marsha C. Lovett, Marie K. Norman, Richard E. Mayer.

The design of the book club was guided by the ideas contributed by a group of post-secondary educators who met at the [BCcampus Festival of Learning](#) in May 2018. At this meeting, we discussed what we wanted in an online book club. We then decided to create a learning experience in our book club that would be as follows:

- **Open:** Anyone interested in the topic would be welcome to attend; Where possible, we'd use openly available tools and resources.
- **Flexible:** We'd use technology to help time-shift and support our participants' busy schedules; There'd be ways to participate: synchronous web chats or asynchronous blog comments.
- **Turn-key technology:** As organizers, the book club would be centralized around technology we could implement readily: a WordPress blog site and a Blue Jeans web conference room sponsored by BCcampus.
- **Practical:** We wanted there to be practical takeaways and opportunities to apply learnings or share experiences with colleagues.
- **Social:** We wanted the book club to be social and **fun** and provide opportunities for discussion in a safe, supportive environment and network.
- **Easy for participants:** We needed low barriers to participating. As a microlearning event, the time required to participate would be less than an hour or two per week with optional challenges or other activities. We also scheduled two reading breaks to provide time for people to catch up.
- Centred around a **seminal work, easily available:** Our selected book was intentional: "How Learning Works: Seven Research-based Principles for Smart Teaching" was a book most post-secondary institutions would have in their teaching and learning centres or libraries, so copies would be readily available. Also, the book's seven chapter structure would lend well to how we could organize book club blog posts and discussions.

ONLINE BOOK CLUB DESIGN ELEMENTS

- The book: "How Learning Works"
- A WordPress blog <https://BCcampusonlinebookclub.wordpress.com>
- Learner activities:
 - Subscribe to the blog
 - Follow the Twitter account @BCcBookClub
 - Read the Monday Chapter Summary posted by the facilitator

- Post an introduction and comment on the blog on the Chapter topic
- Tweet a story related to the teaching and learning topic or share a story
 - Participants who post a comment to blog or twitter with #BookClubBC received a chance to win the prize draw of an Indigo-Chapters gift card
- Participate in the Friday Chapter chats in Blue Jeans web conference room

PROJECT ROLES

The project timeline for the book club was June through August 2018 to prepare and promote the book club and September to November 2018 for the offering. The following are the project roles taken on in order to design, organize, promote, facilitate and evaluate the book club.

One Coordinator

- The role of Coordinator was fulfilled by [BCcampus](#)
- Consultation with community
- Development of budget and project plan
- Recruitment of facilitators
- Selection of book in conjunction with the facilitators
- Creation of the website using WordPress service
- Develop site and content
- Creation of schedule with 2 reading breaks
- Selection of Blue Jeans web conference system
- Onboarding/support of facilitators with the tools
- Social media setup & campaign (e.g Twitter)
- Book Club promotion via facilitators, social media and communication channels
- Posting of content when facilitators require assistance
- Assistance with monitoring blog comments and Twitter
- Evaluation (e.g. Lime survey)
- Review & planning of Fall offering

One Lead Facilitator

- The lead facilitator role was a volunteer whose role was to provide deep knowledge and expertise in teaching and learning and liaison teaching and learning leaders in B.C.
- Tasked to facilitate 1-2 Chapters of HLW.

Six Chapter Facilitators

- Six volunteer facilitators were recruited from the initial meeting at the *BCcampus Festival of Learning* in Vancouver May 2018.
- Each facilitator was responsible for a chapter summary published on Monday morning, responding to participant comments on the blog during their Chapter week and facilitating the web conference chat (45-50 minutes) on Friday mornings.
- A small honorarium of \$50 in the form of a gift card was given to each facilitator.

Participants

- To participate, individuals needed to register as a subscriber to the blog site with their name, email and institutional affiliation. This would send notification of new posts to the blog.
- There was no fee to participate.

OUR LEARNINGS

Overall, we are very pleased with the outcome of this experiment and consider it a success. We were glad to see others participating in various ways, and as organizers, enjoyed re/reading this book, engaging in discussions, reflecting on our own practice, and blogging about it. The selection of WordPress for the blog made things easy. Many of the facilitators were familiar with the platform and it's integration with social media was also very turn-key and simple. Going forward, there a few considerations we need to make and improvements we will make pending further feedback from all involved in the project:

Synchronous chats:

- Time shifting and ability for participants to engage fully is still an issue: Difficult to find a day where everyone can join in a web chat; Note: Our weekly online chats were intentionally not recorded; we wanted to establish a comfortable, safe environment to hold conversations and network. We wanted to establish trust and a spirit of experimentation with the group.
- The Blue Jeans web conferencing service worked well, but we were unsure about the web room capacity (seemed to always top off at nine people) Also, a tool with breakout rooms like might work better to allow for more interactivity.
- We did not have capability to show slides or use a whiteboard, but we did not miss this feature as we wanted to focus efforts on conversation around the topics prompted by reading the book.
- Each week had a different facilitator so there was variation in feel and style for each web conferencing session and chapter. We felt this made it a richer experience for participants. However, we think it would be helpful to offer a few practice sessions for facilitators to play with the web conferencing tool and how they might choose to use features such as the mute function, etc. For this offering we had one facilitator practice session with the web conferencing tool.
- Facilitators posted guiding questions prior to the web conference book chats. It was suggested to ask participants to forward/post the questions they'd like to explore so the focus of the web chat could be tailored to those ideas they were most interested in.
- Participants that attended the Friday chats were at times different people from those that posted on the blog and while it was not required to participate in both modes of learning, people indicated to us that they wanted to attend the weekly chats, but often could not do so because of their busy schedules. We are still exploring how to meet this challenge.

Asynchronous Interaction:

- Commenting on others' reflective blog posts are a quick method for participants to share, but are not ideal for managing deeper or sustained discussions. It was suggested that there be a summary of "discussion" after the chapters but the role and time required to do the content summary of comments and integration with the web chat discussions was not factored into the book club plan

- For deeper discussion, a tool designed with discussion threading is a better choice, but as a first offering we wanted to keep things as simple as possible and work with the tools we had on hand.
- To address concerns about privacy, we are exploring for the next book club offering a service offered in B.C. to post-secondary educators by the [B.C. Open Ed Tech Collaborative](#). They host a number of tools including WordPress, Mattermost (group messaging) and Big Blue Button (web conferencing).

EVALUATION

At the completion of this first book club offering, we sent a brief survey to participants including subscribers of the WordPress site, facilitators and Twitter followers. The response rate was low and this revealed another challenge for us: Offering our book club in an open format made it more of a challenge to know more accurately who was participating, how they were engaging with the book club and to measure our impact.

A teaching and learning centre director, who took part in our book club, advised us to be aware that pure numbers didn't tell the whole story: She knew she had faculty lurking and following the book club discussions, as they commented to her how they found the experience valuable.

As well, we happily discovered that small innovative projects like this online book club have the ability to spawn energy and spin-offs including renewed interest in campus-based book clubs or other faculty focussed events and activities. Two participants told us that they would be planning anew the start of campus-based book clubs for their faculty and instructors. Here are some sample comments from our feedback survey:

I want to thank everyone involved for this book club. I have learned a lot including about how to participate in and run an online book club.

This book has been a revelation and a guide for what I must do in the future.

Good book, good people, insightful comments helped me become a better instructor.

This was a fantastic program. I had to miss a couple of virtual chat sessions but was able to jump back in due to blog. Many great ideas were shared via the blog and online. Also we had several faculty participate in the book club - we gave out 10 free books and although several didn't follow the blog but they read the book or lurked during the online chat. Well done and I am looking forward to the next one.

I couldn't attend all the sessions due to a presentation and meeting commitments. But the sessions I did attend gave me helpful strategies and clarified the best practices of others.

Interesting but after a while I wanted some critical perspectives or analysis of the research underlying the strategies...The facilitators were varied and knowledgeable and the beginning of each week summary was often enlightening.