Advancing book clubs as non-formal learning to facilitate critical public pedagogy in organizations

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Abstract

Book clubs are a well-known form of social engagement and are beneficial for those who take part, yet book clubs are not fully realized within management as a site for learning. This is unfortunate because book clubs that read fiction can "enhance the social processes of learning" (Schreurs et al., 2019: 95) and help employees in search of more critical and emancipatory forms of learning. We theoretically synthesize the literature to advance current thinking with regard to learning through book clubs. We begin by introducing book clubs as non-formal adult learning. Then, book clubs that employ fiction as a cultural artifact are presented as a way for members to build relationships, learn together, and to engage in cultural change work. Next, the traditional notions of book clubs are made pedagogically complex through the lens of critical public pedagogy (Sandlin and Milam, 2008). Finally, we offer two implications: (1) as public pedagogy, book clubs can act as an alternative to traditional learning structures in organizations; and (2) book clubs, when valued as public pedagogy, can be fostered by those in management learning and HRD for consciousness raising and challenging existing mental models in their organizations.

ADVANCING BOOK CLUBS AS NON-FORMAL LEARNING TO FACILITATE CRITICAL PUBLIC PEDAGOGY IN ORGANIZATIONS

Reading is the sole means by which we slip, involuntarily, often helplessly, into another's skin, another's voice, another's soul. - Joyce Carol Oates, Antaeus

Organizations play a crucial role in lifelong learning, especially given that these sites are the most common providers of non-formal education and training (Eraut, 2011; European Commission, 2011). For the organization, opportunities for employee learning is vital to competitiveness, sustainable development, employment, and overall success (Aksakal and Kazu, 2015; Levy, 2011). For the employees, learning opportunities need to be aligned to their individual needs (Caporarello et al., 2019), create opportunities to apply learning into practice (Kemmis et al., 2017), and emphasize social interaction (Froehlich et al., 2014), yet organizations need to find ways to facilitate learning outside the more traditional formal environments. Thus, in this conceptual paper, we posit that book clubs operate as a form of non-formal management learning that may function as critical public pedagogy amongst members as they build trust, engage in collaborative learning, and shape social identities through dialogue and perspective taking.

Traditionally, book clubs are small, locally-dependent groups that form outside an organizational context (such as a library) and are often seen as mere fun, as well as feminine and domestic (Kiernan, 2011). Representations of book clubs in popular culture, like in movies such as *The Book Club* (2018) and *The Jane Austen Book Club* (2007), or in the UK TV series, *The Book Group* (2002-03), portray these groups as rather casual and inconsequential. This is due in some part to these groups being largely born of leisure and hobby and a form of free-choice learning (Falk and Dierking, 2002). Although popular media has perpetuated a stereotype of book clubs as modern-day sewing circles where more wine than novels are consumed, voluntary

book clubs are a "popular, social, and intellectual practice, and a socio-cultural phenomena" (Tyler, 2014: 26) where a group of people meet regularly to discuss a common book (usually face to face, but sometimes in virtual environments). These groups are characterized in extant literature by the freedom of choice they afford members to participate and choose a text, as well as their diversity and generally egalitarian process of dialogue (Álvarez-Álvarez, 2016). Book clubs take place in myriad locations (Peplow et al., 2015) even the workplace (Alsop, 2015) where the focus is often more on non-fiction that favors a technical-rational approach for learning (Gouthro, 2019). Non-fiction texts like the works of Stephen Covey or Amy Edmonson's (2019) *The Fearless Organization* are more likely associated with reading in the workplace because they explicitly aim to inform managers' practice (Czarniawska and Rhodes, 2006; Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 2016), but more creative nonfiction such as Ibram Kendi's *How to be an Antiracist* (2019) or Tara Westover's (2018) memoir, *Educated,* are finding their way into management learning environments, too.

Despite the potential of fiction to facilitate learning in organizational settings (Gouthro, 2019) it is less common to find groups reading fiction together in organizations, as it serves a decidedly different role from traditional business texts. Book clubs that employ fiction are encouraging members to ask "what it means to be human" (Starkey et al., 2019: 596). Fiction can counter (or co-exist) with the more dominant technical competence found in nonfiction by introducing or centering a different reality. In doing so the book club creates a means for considering how that reality is constructed, conceptualized, and fostered (Starkey et al., 2019).

The choice of reading fiction sees book clubs operate in four ways: (1) pedagogically with members as both learner and teacher (Kooy, 2003, 2006; Smith, 1996); (2) transformationally by changing members opinions and mental models or even the values of a

community (Howie, 2003; Zybert, 2011); (3) through the negotiation of cultural influence and the production of meaning (Farr and Harker, 2008; Long, 2003); and (4) with a praxis that is uniquely suited to members' context (Hermes et al., 2008). Moreover, by reading fiction individuals can develop critical social awareness and empathy (Gouthro and Holloway, 2013; Jarvis, 2012; Hoggan and Cranton, 2015). This is especially true when the fiction is written from a non-dominant perspective that invites readers to learn about hegemonic forces and social structures (Slotkin, 2005) as revealed through story, which can engender more empathy than non-fiction texts. When this occurs in an environment like book clubs, the book becomes a popular cultural artefact acting as a "public space" for critical, non-formal learning and "understanding of marginalized others and greater critical social awareness" (Jarvis, 2012: 743).

Engaging with others communally through literature can thus change minds and shape the identities of readers, inspire their social activism, and encourage experiences of social and intellectual exploration (Eberly, 2000; Farr and Harker, 2008) in the workplace and beyond. Through "intersubjective dialogue process" (Álvarez-Álvarez, 2016: 228) critical reflection of the text becomes a conduit of cultural information (Long, 1992) as group members seek ways of initiating and navigating workplace culture. As such, a book of fiction can potentially be used to interpret new information in relation to readers' existing knowledge and previous experiences (Biniecki, 2015), or the new learning can be applied to a wider historical, social, and political context (Freire, 1972).

Building on these ideas, some have attempted to establish book clubs as a form of professional development (Klinker et al., 2010), but despite popularity, positive outcomes generated from participation in book clubs, and an organizational need for more socially driven learning opportunities, book clubs are often dismissed or ignored by scholars (Alsop, 2015;

Tyler, 2014) or explored "tangentially in terms of academic, research-related reading groups" (Macoun and Miller, 2014: 31). This is unfortunate, because book clubs as non-formal learning, can contribute to the call for organizations to "enhance the social processes of learning" (Schreurs et al., 2019: 95) and, when acting as public pedagogy, the book club can help employees in search of more critical and emancipatory forms of learning.

To address this contention, we theoretically synthesize (Jaakkola, 2020) the work on book clubs by presenting carefully selected literature relevant to, and supportive of, the conceptual model we advance (Cropanzano, 2009; Callahan, 2010). Adopting Breslin and Gatrell's (2020) 'prospector' strategy for conceptual review works, we draw literature from distinct domains and merge them to set out new narratives of critical public pedagogy within organizational contexts.   In doing so we offer a conceptual paper that advances current thinking with regard to management and organizational learning through book clubs. Drawing inspiration from the five-stage narrative arc structure (Freytag, 1894) we present the design elements of a conceptual paper (Jaakkola, 2020), first beginning with the exposition, where we introduce book clubs as non-formal adult learning. Next, the rising action presents book clubs as potentially critical and emancipatory learning spaces that foster social connection and cultural change work. The climax follows to reveal how the notions of book clubs presented in the rising action are made pedagogically complex through the lens of critical public pedagogy (Sandlin and Milam, 2008). Finally, in falling action and denouement, we recapitulate the final key ideas and present a representation that extends theoretical conceptions in management learning.

Exposition: Book clubs as non-formal learning

Non-formal learning is distinct from compulsory education and, in the context of organizational learning literature, often includes the concepts of informal and incidental learning

(e.g. Marsick and Watkins, 1999; Hager and Halliday, 2006). Organizations committed to a triple bottom-line philosophy (Garavan and McGuire, 2010) that emphasizes corporate social responsibility do not rely solely on formal learning and instead seek forms of employee development that go beyond skill building for ROI, as they look to improve employees' (as well as their families', community's and stakeholders') quality of life (Pierce and Madden, 2009). Furthermore, there is evidence that the majority of what employees need to accomplish in their work is not gained through formal learning (Cerasoli et al., 2018; Enos et al., 2003) thus emphasizing the need for organizations to find ways to promote more continuous, non-formal learning practices at work (Marsick and Volpe, 1999).

Non-formal learning is not highly structured or classroom-based and it does not lead to formal qualifications or certifications, nor does it have a formal assessment. In the adult education literature, it is characterized as voluntary participation for personal enrichment with social processes such as group discussion and exploration. As opposed to informal learning which occurs through everyday experiences (Merriam et al., 2007), it is activity based and takes place outside of educational institutions, yet inside an organization (Taylor, 2006). This means that non-formal learning processes emerge from an organized activity, but without a formal curriculum (Wahlgren and Aarkrog, 2012). In the workplace, non-formal learning is embedded in planned activities that are not explicitly designed as learning, yet learning is still important (Colardyn and Bjørnåvold 2004) such as games (Henriksen and Børgesen, 2016), mentoring (Liu et al., 2020), volunteerism (Mündel and Schugurensky, 2008), or book clubs. The array of activities are "intended to serve identifiable learning needs of particular subgroups in any given population…" (Coombs, 1976: 282).

It is non-formal learning that promotes multiple levels of learning intentionality (Eraut, 2000) - deliberative, reactive, and implicit. Book clubs in organizations are a deliberative learning space because planning is done to create an environment for learning with intentional engagement and systematic reflection. It is also a space for reactive learning that is more spontaneous, with a varying degree of planning and intentionality, and a space of implicit learning that occurs unintentionally and sometimes unconsciously. Both the reactive and implicit learning are socially constructed through group members' engagement- first with the text and then with each other. In practice, the organization facilitates book clubs for deliberative learning by forming a means for engagement, but the members voluntarily take part and create functional structures that ultimately lead to new meaning making through discussion of texts and the inclusion of different values, norms, and ideas (Tight, 1996).

Rising action: Book clubs for social connection, learning, and cultural change work

With the establishment of book clubs as non-formal learning, we now focus on the ways in which book clubs can connect people, support their learning, and offer the potential of fostering cultural change work.

Book clubs as sites for relationship building

Although there is a commonly held perception that people take part in book clubs simply because they want to meet with others who love to read (Rottmann, 2014), research suggests that for most members, the true value of a book club is in the relationships created through camaraderie and shared experiences as members connect with one another (Benwell et al., 2012; Long, 2003; Pelissero, 2016). Book clubs are "spaces where members share lives, histories, and feelings" (Pelissero, 2016: 80) and serve as a unique community building exercise that, according to Rehberg Sedo (2011), likely does not exist for people in other contexts. This is

confirmed in Poole's (2003) study of Australian women's book clubs. She notes that book discussion gives way to significant self-disclosure that has therapeutic qualities with women supporting and encouraging each other. And although books are the impetus for group formation, in some cases the connections the group develops often lead to members meeting even though they are not not reading (Rottmann, 2014). Rottman (2014: 133) notes in her research, "Without a book to ground the discussion, members still feel the need to come together once a month, reaffirming the social agenda of the book club". As such, book clubs can be the catalyst to address a deeper and perhaps missing connection with others that transcends sharing books and leads to incidental and tacit forms of learning.

One explanation for this is that book clubs provide a space for creating relationships with people in the workplace that an individual might otherwise not have associated with, but with whom they nevertheless form a committed community (Rottman, 2014). In coming together to discuss a text, social bonds are created, which can lead to friendship (Alsop, 2015; Huion, 2008; Howie, 2011). For marginalized members of a workplace, friendships can serve as spaces of social support that challenge internalized notions of inferiority and propel individuals' personal and professional growth because of the way they fulfill unmet psychological needs (Kaeppel et al., 2020). This makes the need for spaces like book clubs that foster relationship formation among colleagues critically important. In her research on a teachers' book club, Rottman noted that regular meetings for book discussions, with the same group of individuals, was an evocative experience often not seen in the workplace or "in their everyday lives" (Rottmann, 2014: 136). It is often this social connection that is the appeal of joining and maintaining one's membership in a book club - even at work.

Social connection with others can be difficult, particularly for newcomers who may lack confidence or social familiarity in an organization, but book clubs can be an opportune space for learning to converse constructively with colleagues (Coleman, 2016). Book club members get to know one another and over time develop a sense of everyone's professional and personal experiences and philosophical perspectives; the result is a growing sense of familial bonds that contribute to discussions in the group. Evidence of this bond is found in the practice of anticipatory response (Beach and Yussen, 2011) in which members use what they've learned about each other's expertise and thinking to plan their own contributions to the discussion of the text, resulting in a shared understanding. Over time, members become "aware that they are not just reading for themselves" (Bessman Taylor, 2007: 129), but are reading with others in mind.

Book clubs as sites of learning with others

The relationship building that occurs in book clubs provides a solid foundation of trust that is necessary for learning (Gubbins and MacCurtain, 2008). Despite the findings from scholars such as Bessman Taylor (2007: 14) that book club members "only occasionally describe what they do in terms of education" book clubs have long been considered a site of learning, particularly for those that are historically excluded from traditional forms of education, including white women and people of color (Kelley, 2008; Rottmann, 2014). Book clubs are novel sites for learning, intellectual curiosity, and development (Long, 2003; Rehberg Sedo, 2004; Rottmann, 2014) that are distinct from formal learning environment, which is consistent with literature exploring book club members' motivations for participation (Bessman Taylor, 2007; Peplow et al., 2015; Ramdarshan Bold, 2019). For example, in a study by Rottmann (2014: 141) members enjoyed the learning that came from discussing the text, yet even these teachers were keen to distance their practices from formal learning like they find in school. The study participants had

a clear "desire to seek new knowledge and learning opportunities," but described a "resistance to hav(ing) the shape of learning even resemble structured education" because of a wish to maintain the pleasure of the activity. Similarly, university librarians who participated in an employee book club preferred the book club format over traditional classroom-style training because it was more enjoyable and led to greater retention of the material than formal professional development (Smith and Galbraith, 2011).

Generally speaking, taking part in book clubs can help members learn as they engage in public speaking, expressing opinions, summarizing information, and presenting arguments. But as much of the literature presents, the learning in book clubs is deeper and more nuanced than simple skill building. Book clubs, like other non-formal learning, can be a form of praxis (Freire, 1973; Lyons and Ray, 2014). Cunliffe (2004) notes that learners makes sense of their own praxis as they move beyond 'knowing-from-within' (Shotter, 1993: 18) by acting as co-constructors of knowledge (Biniecki, 2015; Shrestha et al., 2008) who integrate prior experiences and projections of future use (Biniecki, 2015) thereby transferring, in the case of book clubs, their reading of the text to professional experiences.

As numerous studies of book clubs for teachers demonstrate, this engagement serves as a form of collaborative inquiry (Beach and Yuseen, 2011; Kooy, 2006; van Veen et al., 2012). In Kooy's (2006: 162) work, the shared reading helped members negotiate their professional identities as they create collaborative exchanges of knowledge and the use of self-reflective practices. This kind of non-formal learning resembles a community of practice (CoP) (Twomey, 2010) where the act of shared reading helps participants form a CoP. These groups share inquiry and relational learning, or what Swann (2011) called the co-construction of reading between participants.

Furthermore, although book clubs can in some instances initiate transformational learning that occurs through members having their existing perspectives challenged or broadened, leading to new perspectives (Childress and Friedkin, 2012), more often engagement encourages critical thinking among members (Southwood, 2012). Bessman Taylor's (2007) study of six book clubs (224 meetings in total) explored how participants discussed texts. She describes these groups as engaging in what she describes as a dynamic, prolonged cyclical process of learning. "The usual idea that reading begins when one picks up a book and ends when it is set down, is complicated by the activities and statements of reading group members...an active engagement that begins before reading and continues after it" (Bessman Taylor, 2007: 126). Barstow (2003: 7) concurs arguing that what occurs is not simply a "discrete exercise," but rather an accumulation of members' experiences both in and out of the book club. Bessman Taylor (2007: 123) describes this phenomenon in great detail:

> Members of book groups are readers who anticipate reading a book, they read the book, they reflect on the book and anticipate group discussion, they participate in the discussion, and they often reflect on the book and discussion after the group has met...book group reading is a circle. Each of these events influences future occurrences of that event or other events in the continuum. What has gone on earlier in the group influences that which comes later. Sometimes these influences build cumulatively, demonstrated through occurrences such as the creation of insider language, and sometimes they may function more independently as when the discussion of one book determines whether or not another book is selected for discussion.

Likewise, in organizing and collecting data from two book clubs at the annual meetings of the Association for Academic Psychiatry and the Society for General Internal Medicine, Chisolm and colleagues (2018) found book clubs serving as a form of professional development. The reading and subsequent discussion of books encouraged physicians to challenge existing mental models, tolerate ambiguities, and honor and appreciate the role of culture in their work and the perspectives of their patients. And with a similar population, Peplow and colleagues

(2015) used in-depth conversation analysis of a book group discussion among medical professionals to explore how participants learned as they drew on their existing medical knowledge and professional practice to discuss a text. One finding explained how the book club members projected onto the experience of the characters to contribute to a discussion of Steinbeck's *The Pearl* (1947). They discussed the power held by the doctor in the text and more importantly, were able to examine the doctor's power in light of "contemporary events within the discourse-world of readers' professional experience" (Peplow et al., 2015: 136).

Reading in book clubs thus differs from solitary reading in its acts of discussion which are at the heart of the learning process (Bessman Taylor (2007). Among the various types of discussion members engage in are deliberate discussion of a text (including both dissection and creation), discussions of book selection that anticipate future discussion, and discussion focused on members' reflections on the reading experience and previous discussions (Bessman Taylor, 2007). These book club discussions can be intentionally tied to the workplace and professional practice, where the act of literary reading can be interwoven with organizational themes as members of the book club align "with institutional practices and priorities" that operates in some ways as institutional 'work'" (Peplow et al., 2015: 129). Or the discussions may seem all together off-topic, as members share thoughts on nonbook-related matters (O'Halloran, 2011). Yet, even in those moments, learning is possible.

Book clubs as sites of cultural change work

In addition to relationship building and the learning gained from book clubs, members can also engage in cultural change work (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2015). Spurred by the text, members begin to question their existing mental models and counter the dominant systems and hegemonic practices in their organizations and society. The egalitarian nature of the book clubs

helps to facilitate cultural change processes because shared reading spaces "challenge what is understood as 'proper' knowledge" and because within them "moral grounds are flattened, and we make ourselves open to being 'wrong' as a component in re-making knowledge" (Kaserman and Wilson, 2009: 29). In contrast to the formal work environment, participants in the book club are on equal footing (Brown, 2019) with each contributing their own skills, backgrounds, and perspectives to shape their interpretations of the text (Bessman Taylor, 2007). When this structure is combined with intentionality in selecting texts that stimulate critical reflection and dialogue, there is strong potential for meaning-making that expands or challenges existing mental models.

Employees, and individuals generally, are more supportive of endeavors they are part of creating (Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers, 1998), making voluntary book clubs opportune places to initiate cultural change. Members can take part in critical readings as they take up stories that are not their own and use the reading (and subsequent discussion) for "confronting times of individual or social change" (Long, 2003:188). Book club members use texts and subsequent discussions to learn as they work through, reflect on, or address the social or political issues they encounter in their lives (Pulczinski, 2018) - at home, in their workplaces, or in society more generally. This was the case for participants in a study from Taber et al. (2016: 24) who found that reading and discussion challenged member's existing knowledge and led them to ask new questions, a process of both learning and unlearning. Their experiences are representative of book clubs that act as sites of cultural change in which members interrogate assumptions, narratives, and long held practices. To do this, members must read critically, which is to recognize that reading "can never be divorced from questions of power, privilege, exclusion, and social distinction" (Long, 2003: 16).

The act of critical reading leads book club members to share experiences and build perspectives, not only with each other but with the characters in the text. As individuals read, they construct simulated worlds and these simulations involve imagining the feelings of those in the text. Reading, then, is capable of building empathy for a larger range of characters and identities than readers normally interact with in life (Oatley, 2016), and this has the potential to to reduce bias against those with whom we do not share characteristics (Oatley, 2016). Critical reading prompts individuals to consider alternative perspectives and to engage in perspective-taking, both of which are effective strategies that have been found to reduce bias (Blair et al., 2001; Lilienfeld et al., 2009). These outcomes are supported in a study by Henderson et al. (2020) who conducted interviews with members of a student-faculty book club in a school of medicine in the US. By engaging with fiction, members felt that they grew in their ability to understand their patients. Reading a book like *Hunger: A Memoir of (my) Body* (2017) that addresses issues of race, sexual assault, body image, and the immigrant experience, facilitated members' perspective taking, supported their understanding of those unlike themselves, and led to members' increased empathy.

When readers are willing to stand in another's shoes, mental models expand and book clubs can become a space for engaging in cultural change work (Brown, 2019; Djikic et al., 2013; Mar and Oatley, 2008). This contention is exemplified in a study by Davis (2008) exploring the effect of reading African-American literature in White book clubs in the U.S. She found that members' engagement with these texts lead to cross-racial empathy, new or increased political activism, and participation with movements for social change. Critical reading in the midst of the book club thus might be considered a dialogic literary gathering (Álvarez-Álvarez, 2019), where the reading becomes an "intersubjective process of approaching a text by moving

to more profound interpretations, critically reflecting on the text and its context, and intensifying

reading comprehension through interaction with others" (pp. 74-75).

　　For white women and people of color in particular, book clubs may also provide a safer

place of such dissent than their standard workplace setting. Take for example, a study of

women's identity development in reading communities where Howie (2011: 153) describes book

clubs as a site of dissent and consciousness-raising which enabled women "to speak, imagine or

live alternative subjective positions that are relevant to their own changing needs and interests".

Such dissent from Howie and others (see Clarke and Nolan, 2014; Devlin-Glass, 2001; Hartley

and Turvey, 2004; Poole, 2003) dispels the claim from critics that book clubs can lead to

groupthink (Clarke and Nolan, 2014). On the contrary, even when members express opposing

views and opinions about important social and cultural issues, book clubs remain a safe place for

discussion (Peplow et al., 2015). Furthermore, dissenting ideas can extend the cultural change

work of book clubs whereby they serve as important democratic platforms. Chaaban and

Sawalhi's 2018 found in their study of book clubs in Arab countries that participants became

"better informed members of society, actively participating in making changes within their own

lives, and their societies." This notion of book clubs as sites of cultural change work is not new.

Historically, African American literary societies functioned as a public demonstration of the

rights of Black people to enjoy political, educational, and economic equality (McHenry, 2002).

　　Book club members also leverage relationships and learning to act as a unifying force to

counter dominant systems found in work and in society by making a safe space to engage in

cultural change work. For instance, in her qualitative study exploring how participation

facilitated women's networking in four work-based book clubs in the UK and the USA, Alsop

(2015) found that overwhelmingly, involvement resulted in positive networking in members'

workplaces. This was due to the connections made in the book clubs that countered feelings of

exclusion the women often experienced in their organization dominated by old boys' networks.

The book club provided members access to valuable organizational knowledge and information

and created a community of reciprocity in the workplace as the women helped and supported one

another.

Reading is, as Twomey (2007) contends, a form of resistance, and book clubs help

members to navigate with others the experiences of marginalization. Kabba (2013: 7) for

example, stressed the unique communal value of book clubs for women of color:

> Black women's book clubs not only provide a community in which women can
> share their enjoyment of literature and develop close relationships with like-minded
> women, but most crucially they provide a safe space in a society that continues to
> struggle with issues of racism and sexism, allowing Black women to critique society,
> build community, and negotiate a sense of self.

Similar benefits of helping marginalized members to navigate identity and oppression

have been found in gay men's book clubs (Pruitt, 2010: 132) where men sought "solace by

secluding themselves withother gay men on a social and intellecual level". Another book club

empowered women to discuss the taboo topic of their sexuality and make sense of them amid

changing norms and expectations (Craig, 2016). Thus book clubs have the potential to serve as

sites for meaningful cultural and social justice work (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, 2014; Farr and

Harker, 2008; Ross et al., 2006) when acting as public pedagogy. Such work is possible when

bonds form from dialogue between members and when the book acts as a catalyst for

perspective-taking and intersubjective exchanges. In the workplace this outcome is critical for

understanding the people we work with and for. Reading can help employees, particularly those

who work to serve populations different from their own, to understand the issues affecting their

clients (Greenwald and Adams, 2008).

The planned, shared reading in book clubs acts as a means for exploring ideas that disrupt normative social relations, dominant histories, and cultural and institutional structures (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, 2014). The process of reading and discussion serves as a form of cultural mediation for agency that is not just disruptive, but likely ideologically dynamic, creative, and empowering. And as previously alluded to, this effect might be more pronounced when book club members engage with fiction as a popular cultural artifact since those texts can act as public pedagogy for considering others' experiences with fewer risks (Kidd and Castano, 2013). Given the few spaces available in organizations for prolonged and intimate perspective building, where dissent is welcomed, the seemingly simple act of reading and discussing a text in a book club becomes incredibly powerful.

Climax: Critical public pedagogy

The relationships and trust that can be built through the shared experience of book club produce not only social connections, but a means of learning and the possibility of engagement in cultural change work. Given these, we argue that book clubs as non-formal learning in organizations may act as critical public pedagogy. As a non-formal learning environment, book clubs are consistent with more emancipatory forms of learning that reject the inundation of knowledge from an expert (Freire, 1972), making them one way forward to creating new learning opportunities in organizations. Book clubs provide a counterweight to more top-down, linear, or organizationally-controlled learning spaces, in part because the non-formal learning that occurs within them is derived from engagement with others instead of being guided by an expert (Ziegler et al., 2014). This means the book club is not solely a site of learning for the benefit of the organization, but may also act as public pedagogy.

Public pedagogy is at the crossroads of culture, learning, and social change (Rich and Sandlin, 2017). It is a concept "in which public refers not to a physical site of educational phenomena but rather to an idealized outcome of educational activity: the production of a public aligned in terms of values and collective identity" (Sandlin et al., 2011: 342). As a theoretical frame it can help us to understand how popular culture, like media (Stead and Elliott, 2019), social movement activism and museums (Grenier and Hafsteinsson, 2016), and even comic books (Jagodzinski, 2014) or hip-hop (Williams and Carruthers, 2010) act as spaces for learning and for teaching people to think "about who they are and how the world works" (Sandlin et al., 2017: 823). Public pedagogy becomes critical public pedagogy when the public spaces are used to further social justice issues (Zorrilla and Tisdell, 2016). It brings together public spaces and popular culture to facilitate interactions among learners that expose hegemonic structures so dominant ideologies can be challenged (Brady, 1998; 2006; Reid, 2010) along with previously held assumptions (Sandlin et al., 2010; Zorrilla and Tisdell, 2016). That interaction occurs through dialogue which fosters critical reflection and critical consciousness (Burdick and Sandlin, 2013; Zorrilla and Tisdell, 2016).

More feminist articulations of critical public pedagogy in particular are powerful for framing learning through book clubs that recognizes the need for embracing "the powerful role everyday cultural texts and discourses can play as dynamic, dialectic, and political vehicles of resistance" (Savage, 2010: 109). Brookfield (2004) would argue that the critical dialogue inherent in the process is a hallmark of adult learning that requires engaging in ideology critique and understanding a larger perspective stemming from learning and critically assessing new information through public spaces; such as literature, art or film and television (Sandlin et al., 2011; Zorrilla and Tisdell, 2016). When this happens, popular cultural artifacts like fiction

encourage and position those at the margins of an organization or society toward social justice activism (Dentith and Brady, 1998), to resist cultural systems of oppression (Wright, 2010) and learn awareness and, consequently, disrupt dominant ideologies (O'Malley, Sandlin, and Burdick, 2020). This is because reading literature can "expand one's sympathies in a way that real life cannot" (Hoggan and Cranton, 2015: 7) like developing empathetic anger that leads to engagement "in the cause of social justice" (Jarvis, 2012: 743) or more dramatically, a perspective transformation (Lawrence and Cranton, 2015). Moreover, Gouthro and Holloway (2013) note that fiction can help readers "exercise agency from within the imaginative, critical choices they are able to make in their own learning" (p. 64). And by engaging in discussion of fiction with others, "...learners construct new meaning and transform their collective experiences into knowledge through their conversations" (Baker et al., 2005: 412) in an act of critical public pedagogy.

Falling action and denouement: Extending organizational book clubs as critical public pedagogy

In this paper we have drawn inspiration from the five-stage narrative arc structure (Freytag, 1894) to theoretically synthesize (Jaakkola, 2020) existing scholarship on book clubs. Derived from the literature, we contend that voluntary book clubs are non-formal learning in organizations where relationships and trust can be built through shared experience and social connections through reading and discussing fiction. Book clubs can create a means of learning that results in new knowledge, praxis, dialogue, and reflexivity and can also trigger members to engage in cultural change work. In doing so, we extend theoretical conceptions of management learning by substantiating book clubs as a form of non-formal learning that may act as critical public pedagogy within organizations (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Book Clubs as Critical Public Pedagogy in Organizations
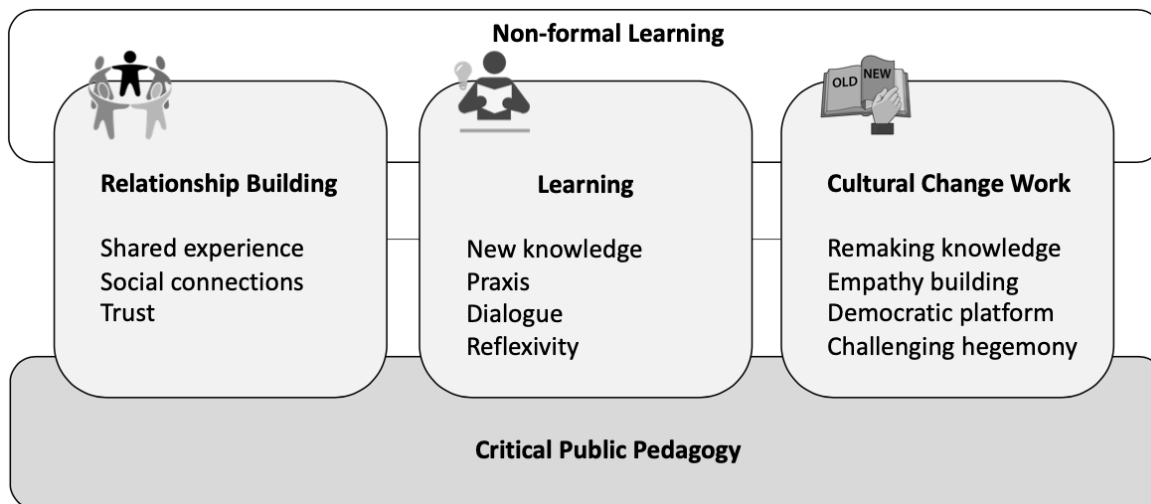
If we agree with Twomey (2007) that literacy and reading are not solely an individual endeavor, but instead a dual responsibility of social systems and practices, then the potential of voluntary book clubs that focus on fiction as an opportunity for non-formal organizational learning makes sense for two reasons. First, it addresses Debecq's (2009) call for moving management learning beyond a narrow focus on content by framing book clubs within the scholarship of teaching and learning. This happens when book clubs are situated as an alternative to traditional formal learning structures that are common in organizations. Knowing that knowledge is embedded in the social relationships of organizations (March, 1991) makes book clubs invaluable as a source of learning since they bring people together (Huion, 2008) through substantial dialogue with others, where friendship and solidarity can grow allowing "instrumental networking" to improve (Alsop, 2015: 31). We contend that in contrast to more formal and traditional educational or training environments, there is little pressure in book clubs to demonstrate academic or professional competence; instead, these non-formal learning spaces

should be free of professional judgment and evaluation and allow members to interweave their personal interpretations of the text (Alsop, 2015; Reilly, 2008).

In order to "foster inclusive discourse, where all alternately speak and listen" (Berg, 2008: 150) and promote trust building, we stress that book clubs in the workplace should remain voluntary associations since the learning, as well as the joy of reading, would be greatly diminished or completely eliminated with the commodification of book clubs. Organizations may be tantalized by the prospect of appropriating and formalizing book clubs to "obscur[e] the political 'work' that is done with and through the language of learning" (Biesta, 2013: 6). For a book club to function as public pedagogy in the workplace, however, the values and concerns of the organization cannot be placed ahead of the needs of the members and control of the group needs to rest with its members.

Reading, particularly through novels selected by readers, is remarkably powerful since it can reflect popular culture and connect with their own experiences (Jarvis, 2003) rather than the values and concerns of an organization. That means book selections should reflect popular culture and group interest, and the discussion should be generated by members in ways that connect each other's experiences or the previously unknown experiences of others. It also requires the book club to exist outside the bounds of managerial control, resisting the pressures of 'learnification' in which organizations co-opt 'learning' toward instrumental ends (Biesta, 2013). Book clubs, we contend, should remain voluntary associations and be "spaces where competing, conflicting, diverging authorities can co-exist" (Berg, 2008, p. 150).

Creating such an inclusive environment may prove important given the significance of trust for organizational learning and performance (Edmondson and Moingeon, 1999). Crucially, trust, which is often regarded as a proxy for social capital (Helliwell and Huang, 2010), is a

strong determinant of job satisfaction and in turn, life satisfaction. In the absence of organizationally-facilitated groups to build these associations between members, the book club functions as a mechanism to foster trust and social capital. Books facilitate inquiry (Miettinen and Virkkunen, 2005), and can work to span peoples' social divisions, facilitate inter-subjective (Cunliffe, 2011) learning, and act as "a holding ground for ideas for communication" (Ewenstein and Whyte, 2009: 10). As such, we argue that book clubs afford social capital in workplace settings where social capital's relative absence or presence can determine one's inclusion, satisfaction, and learning and development on the job. Given that social capital is on the decline (Ferragina and Arrigoni, 2017) and that workplace environments that create competition and isolation are common, the book club is a simple yet potent counter to workplace exclusion.

Book clubs facilitate inclusion by simultaneously connecting employees from a range of departments while breaking down silos and minimizing workplace hierarchies (Peplow et al., 2015). As an unconventional means of creating a human connection in organizations, these spaces may prove valuable for any employee, but may be especially useful to those who struggle to establish relationships, are more reserved and introspective, or those who find traditional networking spaces unwelcoming. This contribution in turn is likely to improve learning and development among book club members. Learning through book clubs underscores the role others play in finding and making meaning. The trust and forming of bonds helps each member of the book club to consider others' perspectives, and together they build an emergent and shared understanding of the meaning of the text, as well as a praxis founded on shared expectations for possible actions that have implications for organizational practices. So, from an organizational standpoint, book clubs offer an alternative environment, outside traditional learning structures

that is consistent with Poell and Van der Krogt's (2003) call for learning in organizations that emphasizes collective reflection and progressive insight.

For organizations that are largely homogeneous, this relationship building also means book clubs can serve as a space of public pedagogy as members encounter differences that are "more likely to occur through textual engagement than through encounters with other members" (Burwell 2007: 285). This engagement can be amplified by the choice of a book. A text capable of generating understanding and perspective-taking of identities and experiences not well represented or understood by group members acts as public pedagogy that fosters social justice. By conceiving of book clubs in this way we nudge the management learning field back towards its adult learning foundations where learning is valued as an emancipatory practice. In doing so, the act of reading is no longer simply a means to attain knowledge, but is also an assertion of entitlement to personal space and time (Radway, 1984) - even in the workplace.

Second, if we see book clubs in organizations as public pedagogy then we can extend existing thinking on reflexive management learning (RML). Much like RML (Cotter and Cullen, 2012; 2015), public pedagogy in the form of book clubs help learners identify and confront dominant assumptions. The scholarship on reflexive learning originally emphasized the individual learner as they reflect and critique their own individual praxis (Parker et al., 2020), but that narrow conceptualization has expanded to consider the part others play in reflexive learning, such as in the practice of critical-reflexivity. Hibbert and Cunliffe (2015) describe this form of reflexivity as a means of questioning social practices and organizational policies that is more productive in particular, receptive learning contexts (Parker et al., 2020), like book clubs.

These spaces can be fostered by those in the fields of management learning and HRD for consciousness raising and challenge existing mental models in their organizations, and in turn,

potentially mitigate biases. Fiction can work as a popular cultural artifact as readers reflect and challenge "traditional norms, in (non-stereotypical) portrayals of characters of specific cultural groups of those who either do not represent the dominant culture, or who do not ascribe to its values" (Tisdell and Thompson, 2007, p. 653). This means that when fiction written from a non-dominant perspective is read in book clubs, readers engage reflexively and imagine their role in combating hegemonic forces and social structures while learning together to find ways to address and change these systems. As public pedagogy, book clubs and the book serves as "a powerful mechanism" (Stead and Elliott, 2019:184) for revealing master narratives since fiction can mirror or contradict existing normative representations perpetuated in the workplace. We posit that adding book clubs as public pedagogy to management learning practices provides one way to ensure critical reflexivity that is central to building "the transformational bridge between experience and learning" (Sutherland, 2013: 28). It also answers the call for the use of popular cultural artifacts that allow individuals to challenge assumptions and consider how these texts reflect and reinforce power and inequalities (Sinclair, 2007).

When we think of book clubs as public pedagogy buttressed by reflexive practices we also open up the opportunity for management learning to look "beyond the boundaries of the corporation to their larger responsibilities in terms of complex issues such as sustainability, diversity and difference, and ethics" (Cox and Hassard, 2018: 548). To do this requires the unlearning of organizational knowledge (Fortis et al., 2018) propagated in formal learning environments that privilege hegemonic systems. Sonenshein (2005) points out that through discussion of individuals' shared understanding of their organization's purpose and character, organizational practices are often questioned. As we have demonstrated, a book (of fiction) can serve as a catalyst for these internal conversations. In turn, the public pedagogy of book clubs

facilitates productive social criticism that helps employees' form understandings and ascribe meanings to their role in social responsibility and social justice while contributing to the ways their organization defines its moral standards.

In conclusion, despite claims of book clubs slipping "through disciplinary cracks to find themselves in a scholarly no-man's land" (Long, 2003: x) we have shown myriad benefits of book clubs in organizations. Huber (1991) argues that the more varied interpretations are among individuals, the more learning will happen in an organization, so it goes to reason that management learning should champion an array of diverse learning environments both formal and non-formal. We extend understandings of learning within organizations by explicating how book clubs as a non-formal learning environment hold the promise of serving as critical public pedagogy - to move beyond simply an instrument of employee learning to a means of critical consciousness raising within organizations. Engaging in reading and discussing fiction with others can produce a critical and emancipatory form of adult learning that contributes to establishing spaces that provide sociocultural influence among members and supports employees' ability to reveal and counter hegemonic practices in their organization. Our hope is that our work both inspires management learning practitioners to help book clubs flourish in their organizations, and opens pathways for management learning scholars to study book clubs with new insights.

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