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Reading, Discussing, and Sharing: Creation of a Vibrant Transnational Online Learning Community through the International Book Club

Abstract

The present paper reports on the findings from the first four years of an ongoing, longitudinal study which examines the experiences and perceptions of Polish college participants in the International Book Club, an extension of a campus common read program at an American university. More specifically, the paper examines participants' experiences with the book, both inside and outside the classroom, and examines their opinions about the issues discussed in each year's book selection, their attitudes toward that issue and whether or not their attitude toward the issue was changed through this experience, their attitudes toward public discussions and whether or not their attitude toward public discussions was changed through this experience, and whether or not reading the book and participating in the club helped to improve their English-speaking abilities. Quantitative data, in the form of a nine-statement survey, and qualitative data, in the form of a nine-question open-ended questionnaire, were collected and analyzed. While a great deal of the literature on common read programs has explored the experiences of participants within the North American context, there is a dearth of research outside of that context, including the Polish context. The present study attempts to ameliorate this situation. The main findings from the study show that, overall, participants enjoyed the experience of reading the book and that participation in the program has been beneficial for them, including getting them to read more, to engage in discussions more, to think more deeply about more diverse topics and issues, and perhaps most importantly, to improve their English language abilities.

Keywords: common read programs, International Book Club

Common Reads and the One Book, One City Movement

Over the last 25 years, common read programs have proliferated and expanded at public libraries in towns and cities across the United States. As Rogers (2002, p. 16) points out, localized book clubs have long been a part of the fabric of public libraries in the United States. In 1998, however, he writes, the concept of localized book clubs of “small groups of diehard readers” was “amplified to the tenth power” when librarian Nancy Pearl of the Washington Center for the Book at the Seattle [Washington] Public Library initiated a city-wide book club, dubbed “If All of Seattle Read the Same Book,” where library patrons throughout the entire library system were encouraged to read in common the book *The Sweet Hereafter* by author Russell Banks.

In her brief article entitled “‘One Book’ Programs Span the Nation,” *Der Spiegel* points out that these programs, often referred to as “One Book, One City” programs, or alternatively as “One City, One Book” programs, “can focus on a single community or span whole cities” (2005, p. 19) and the idea has even been extended to include an entire state when Arizona launched its “OneBookAZ” program in April 2002 (Rogers, 2002, p. 16).

Nowadays, each fall, with the commencement of the new school year, students at colleges and universities across the United States find themselves joining in on this phenomenon through campus common read programs. Published in 2015, under the auspices of the National Association of Scholars (NAS), Thorne’s research (2015) showed 341 American colleges and universities assigning common read texts, with a total of 231 different books assigned, during the 2013–2014 school year. Randall (2019), following up on Thorne’s work through the NAS-produced publication *Beach Books*, found just a few years later that that number had grown during the 2018–2019 school year to 518 college common read selections at 475 institutions, including 45 institutions in the state of California alone, and could be found in all but three American states.

Literature Review

Campus Common Read Programs

So what, exactly, do campus common read programs entail? Laufgraben (2006, p. ix), writing in the foundational text *Common Reading Programs Going Beyond the Book*, states that “[a] simple definition is that common reading

programs are educationally purposeful programs that engage students in a variety of in- and out-of-class academic and social experiences.” As she points out, campus common read programs can vary greatly in “type, expectations, scope, and size” (p. 11). She expands, explaining that some campus programs will require students who are just entering the college or university to read the book that has been selected during the summer immediately prior to their arrival on campus. They will then be expected to participate in discussions on the book with both teachers and fellow students once they have arrived on the campus. Other campuses will have students read the selected book during their period of orientation to the campus. Other programs, rather than selecting a single book, may provide students “with a reader consisting of multiple reading sections organized around a theme” (Laufgraben, 2006, p. 11).

While most campus common read programs focus solely on campus participants, other programs may invite members of the surrounding community to read a book in common with the members of the university community, while other campus read programs “have grown to include library exhibits, film series, theatrical performances, and grant-funded faculty development experiences” (Laufgraben, 2006, p. 11). “The ‘common’ component,” Laufgraben emphasizes, “involves a targeted audience asked to read the same text(s) in a defined period of time so that participants can engage in an academic discourse about those texts” (p. 11).

Goals and Purposes of Common Read Programs

The goals and purposes of the common read programs that have proliferated across American colleges and universities in the quarter of a century since Nancy Pearl began the movement tend to fall into five categories, which Thorne (2015) has classified by examining key words found in the rationales that schools provide for their programs. The categories that she has identified include “(1) building community on campus, (2) setting academic expectations, (3) starting a conversation, (4), encouraging students to become involved in social activism, and (5) inspiring thoughtfulness or ‘critical thinking’” (136).

Other perspectives argue that common read programs can be used as an effective way to encourage students to explore their personal values and ethics; to help campus constituents become more aware of the cultural diversity that exists around them, both on the campus itself as well as in the communities that surround those campuses; to help students feel that they are valued members of that wider community; and to help integrate social and academic experiences into university life (Boff et al., 2007; Nadelson & Nadelson, 2012).

Much of the literature on common read programs also claims that reading books not directly associated with homework can serve to encourage students

to enjoy the reading process more, as well as to increase the overall amount of reading that students do, including reading that is done for pleasure as well as learning (Paulson, 2006; Twiton, 2007; Mallard et al., 2008; Nadelson & Nadelson, 2012). An additional study found that students who read the entire common read text were more likely to report a stronger connection to their campus community and even had higher academic achievement in college (Daugherty & Hayes, 2012).

Campuses have also begun to recognize that common read programs can serve as an effective way to at least partially fill the gap that has been created by the loss of the traditional core curricula that characterized colleges and universities for so many generations and that having students in the same year read at least one book in common is an effective method to ensure that students have a shared intellectual experience with their peers (Thorne, 2015).

Expanded Partnerships across the Campus

While most campus common read programs have traditionally been the province of first-year experience programs, other entities from across the campus have also become deeply involved in campus common read programs over the last two decades.

One group that has been particularly active in the success of campus common read programs are first-year writing programs, which are widely seen as a convenient and logical place to integrate common reads since virtually all first-year college students must take at least one of these courses (Van Vaerenwyck, Clark, & Pasinella, 2002). And while the goals and purposes of common read programs can vary widely, as detailed above, nearly all overlap with the goals of first-year writing programs and the work carried out by those who administer writing programs (Benz et al., 2013).

The approaches that first-year writing programs use to achieve their desired outcomes can vary widely as well. Many writing programs take a traditional focus on the book, incorporating the common read text into their first-year writing courses and addressing the reading through a set of inquiry-based assignments (Van Vaerenwyck et al., 2002). At the other end of the spectrum, some programs, such as that described by Wranovix and Isbell (2020, p. 2) take a more modern digital approach by turning “to the concept of social annotation in a digital environment to reimagine the common read as an interactive experience, one in which students read a text together and can see in real time the thoughts and interpretations of their peers.”

Another entity that has become integral to campus common read program success is the academic library. Librarians are considered to have, as Angell (2019, p. 1) puts it, the ability to “collaborate with a wide variety of campus

departments to better incorporate a common read into the fabric of university life” and by playing “significant roles in selecting, promoting, and further supporting the common read.” Academic librarians are also seen as being able to contribute to the success of common read programs in ways that first-year experience or first-year writing programs cannot, such as through the creation of faculty teaching resources directly related to the book, which can include highly customized research guides, and by creating such extracurricular additions as book displays that help “to bring the book to life” (Chestnut, 2011, p. 55).

The inclusion of the academic library into the mix has been found to produce numerous other benefits as well. Within an academic environment, for example, libraries can bolster partnerships among students, librarians, faculty, and administrators. In addition, Rodney (2004, p. 1) claims, “students are often unaware of the many research resources that university libraries can provide and if faculty, such as first-year writing program faculty, don’t explicitly include library/research activities in their course curriculum, academic libraries can easily become storehouses rather than centers of learning.” By participating in campus common read programs, students are introduced to novel research topics and experience diverse opportunities to learn and practice important critical thinking, oral communication, and written communication skills, “while at the same time providing exciting and intellectually stimulating experiences that will encourage reading and open discussion and debate beyond the classroom” (p. 1).

Other entities have taken the campus common read program in a number of different and more specific directions, including using the campus read program as a focal point when creating a health sciences specific learning community and using the book to expand and improve the experiences of students participating in that learning community (Virtue et al., 2018); using the common read to create an off-shoot program whose focus is to explicitly foster empathy in college students (Graves & Reinke, 2021); using the read as a way to foster greater collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs (Delmas & Harrell, 2014); or focusing exclusively on memoirs set in New York City and written by authors who are available to visit campus (Moser, 2010).

And while most campus common read programs involve students only during the first academic term of the school year, Maloy et al. (2017) describe a year-long common read model that uses a first term book club experience to promote faculty development which allows for cross-disciplinary interactions, including the development of both events and assignments, which can then be integrated into courses during the following term by the instructors who were involved in the program. They argue that the structure of their program promotes college reading at their institution as it “builds an intellectual community of students and faculty across the campus. It posits college reading as a sustained collaborative, intellectual enterprise in which students and faculty

critically consider the context and implications of a text across disciplines” (p. 68).

As can readily be seen from the discussion above, there is a great deal of literature on the experiences of students participating in common read programs within the North American context, particularly those participating through colleges and universities in the United States. On the other hand, research that addresses the experiences of common read participants beyond those borders is greatly lacking. The present paper strives to partially remedy that situation through its examination of a transnational common read program, especially within the Polish context, thereby expanding both the research and the understanding of this interesting and important topic.

Background and Institutional Context

The International Book Club (IBC) has its origins in the campus common read program of California State University, Bakersfield (CSUB), where it is widely known throughout the community as the One Book Project. CSUB is a comprehensive, four-year, regional university located roughly 180 kilometers to the north of Los Angeles, California. As a member of the 23-campus California State University system, CSUB serves over 11,000 students per school year, the majority of whom are Hispanic and the first in their family to go to college.

Begun in fall 2007, the One Book Project was originally created to support the university’s First-Year Experience (FYE) program, whose courses are designed to help students make the transition from high school to college. From its inception, the One Book Project has been an “in-semester” common read program where students read and study the selected book in first-year courses throughout the first academic term of the school year. At CSUB, the selected text is a required component of both First-Year Experience and Composition classes—both of which are required of all first-time freshmen. Over the last 15 years, it has also grown to be included in courses throughout the University’s General Education program.

The goals of the One Book Project, derived primarily from Laufgraben (2006), include:

- providing a common academic experience for all first year and transfer students;
- strengthening the academic atmosphere of the university;
- connecting students to their peers and instructors;
- getting students involved in campus activities through a shared learning experience;
- modeling academic behaviors;

- setting expectations for student success;
- fostering campus and community involvement;
- promoting more meaningful learning.

The fall 2021 semester marked the 15th year that CSUB sponsored the One Book Project. During the Fall 2018 and Fall 2019 editions, the selected authors were invited to campus to attend an afternoon reception, which included having the author help to present writing and art awards to both college and high school students, and were then asked to give a 30- to 40-minute keynote speech, followed by a half-hour question-and-answer session and a book signing. Unfortunately, due to the outbreak of the COVID pandemic, the 2020 and 2021 author keynote speeches and question-and-answer sessions were held virtually over Zoom, eliminating the possibility of book signings.

The International Book Club

Begun during the fall 2018 semester and designed to be a transnational extension of the One Book Project, the IBC is a common read partnership program that initially brought students from the University of Applied Sciences in Nysa, Poland, together with students enrolled in CSUB's First-Year Experience and First-Year Composition courses, as well as with students studying at CSUB's intensive English program, the American Language Institute. During the four years that the IBC has been in existence, the program has evolved to also include participation, at different times and to different degrees, from students in Ensenada, Mexico, Coban, Guatemala, Buenos Aires, Argentina, Hradec Králové, Czech Republic, and Bratislava, Slovakia.

Over the last four years, the nature of the program has also evolved substantially, especially in response to the changes within both the Polish and American educational systems that have been necessitated by the COVID pandemic. Beginning initially as an asynchronous project where students would read the book and discuss a predetermined set of questions in their own individual classes, then interact with their international partners only through a fairly simple online blog, the IBC has now grown into a more sophisticated program with a more advanced website in which students can add vlogs, including those that introduce themselves to their international partners, and through which they can receive additional information and resources beyond what they get in their individual classes. More significantly, the program now also includes synchronous, virtual meetings between program participants in which they can directly interact with, and learn from, their international student counterparts. Because the IBC involves countries on three different continents, as well as universities with quite different course schedules and timetables, the creation of a workable plan for synchronous meetings has been challenging at best.

Based on evidence that this study has gathered thus far, however, the effort appears to be well worth it.

The Study

The data examined in this article is derived from an ongoing, longitudinal study that examines the experiences and impressions of Polish college students who have participated in the IBC. Thus far, there have been four editions of the project, with data collected after each run. The analysis presented in this article analyzes data gathered between October 2018 and December 2021. In none of the project surveys was a division made between female and male members of the IBC. To date, the study has been conducted in Nysa, a small city in southwestern Poland, with a population of over 40 thousand residents. Over the course of the study, most of the college students who participated in the common read program lived in Nysa or in smaller towns and villages in the nearby region.

Participants

In the first stage of the study, from October 2018 to January 2019, second-year students taking courses through the Department of Modern Languages at the University of Applied Sciences in Nysa, Poland, discussed *Incarceration Nations* (2016) by Baz Dreisinger. A total of 11 second-year college students were surveyed in the fall 2018 project's run as shown in Table 1 (see Appendix). In the second year of the study, from October 2019 to January 2020, project participants read *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* (2009) by William Kamkwamba and Bryan Mealer. During this program, the groups of readers got larger, including freshmen and sophomores this time and growing to 36 first-year and 23 second-year college participants as presented in Tables 2 and 3 (see Appendix). As part of the third and fourth editions of the study, second-year students at the University of Applied Sciences in Nysa discussed *Broad Band: The Untold Story of the Women Who Made the Internet* (2018) by Claire L. Evans during October 2020, and then *A Dream Called Home* (2018) by Reyna Grande in October 2021. Thirty-one second-year college students participated in the 2020 common read program (Table 4, see Appendix), while 21 college learners, who were enrolled in second-year courses, took part in the 2021 IBC project (Table 5, see Appendix).

Instruments

For this study, both quantitative data and qualitative data were gathered in an attempt to give a full picture of the experiences and impressions of participants in the IBC during the four-year period of study. Quantitative data was gathered through a nine-statement survey administered to all participants after each of the four editions of the IBC. This survey attempted to gather data on the experiences of reading each year's selection, examining participants reading experiences both inside and outside of class, as well as ascertaining whether participants' viewpoints had been influenced by reading the book. Specifically, the questionnaire asked participants to respond with a simple "yes" or "no" to the following statements: (1) I enjoyed reading the book, (2) I would recommend the book to others, (3) I talked to my friends about the book outside of class, (4) I talked to my family about the book outside of class, (5) Reading the book encouraged me to read more, (6) Reading the book has made me want to read more about the subject, (7) Reading the book caused me to explore ideas and issues that I might not have thought about otherwise, (8) Reading the book caused me to have a change in attitude toward the subject, and (9) Reading the book has helped me understand English better.

Qualitative data was then gathered through a follow-up electronic questionnaire which attempted to delve deeper into the experiences of participants in the program through more open-ended questions. These questions included the following: (1) Do you think that the IBC project, in cooperation with California State University, Bakersfield, should be continued? Why? Why not?, (2) Have you read all the chapters of the book you were assigned to? If not, why not?, (3) After reading a chapter, did you prepare answers to the questions assigned as homework? If yes, how? If not, why was this the case?, (4) What have you gained by taking part in the project?, (5) Has [the book] changed your attitude to any of the problems touched upon in the book? Why or why not?, (6) In what ways has the book changed your attitude to the above-mentioned problems? If the book has not changed your attitude to any of the issues described in the book, why do you think this is the case?, (7) Do you think that public discussions on topics mentioned in the book are important? Why or why not?, (8) How important to you was the online discussion of the book?, (9) What have you gained by taking part in the online discussion?

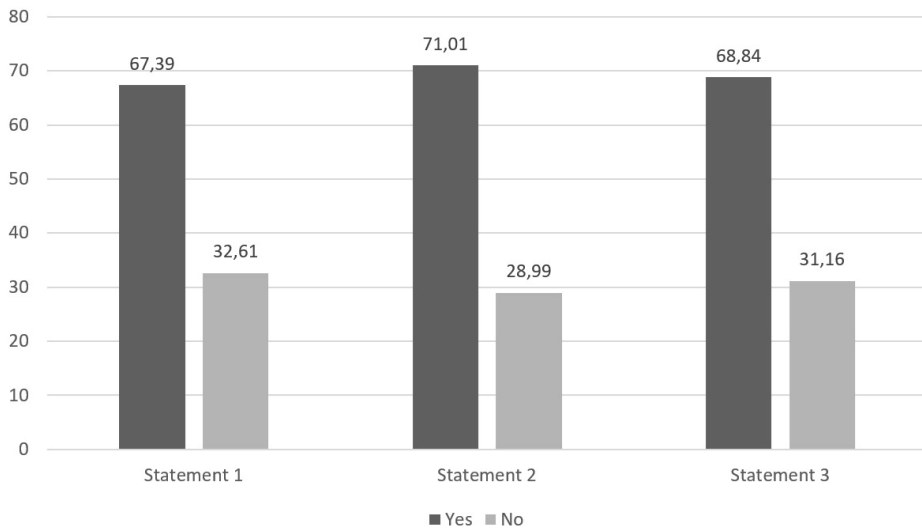
Survey Results

Overall, the data gathered through the four editions of the survey administered at the end of each edition has proven to be quite promising, with some notable exceptions. (Please see the Appendix for a complete breakdown of the

responses for each of the separate editions and for each of the different sub-groups surveyed.)

Figure 1

Collective Percentage Showing IBC Project Participants' Responses to Statements 1, 2, and 3 Gathered through the Four Editions of the Survey



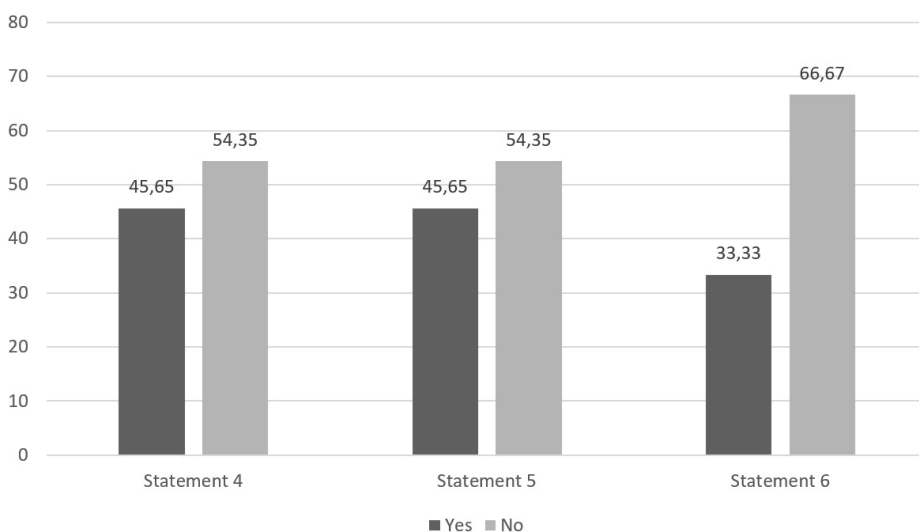
As can be seen in Statement 1 in Figure 1, over 67% of the respondents indicated that they enjoyed reading the book selection. Likewise, a very healthy 71% of the participants expressed that they would recommend the book to others (Statement 2). And as Statement 3 demonstrates, 68% of the students taking part in the IBC also asserted that they had talked to their friends about the book outside of class. That shows that the majority of the readers taking part in the following runs of the project appreciated the reading assignments, which makes the IBC a form of education approved by the students. Interestingly enough, the overall number of participants who were willing to recommend the book they had perused was even higher than the group of college students that found pleasure in turning the pages. The data also showcase that the selected readings made an impact on the majority of the students as they touched upon the content of the work when conversing with their friends outside the class as well, which with the high percentage proving enjoyment reinforces the educational value of the project and does not restrict it to a classroom.

Unfortunately, not all of the responses were quite so positive. For example, as Statement 4 in Figure 2 shows, only 45% of the respondents indicated that they had discussed the book with family members outside of class, with almost

55% expressing that they had not done so. Likewise, only 45% of the participants responded that reading the book had encouraged them to read more, while almost 55% declaring that it did not (Statement 5). On the most negative side, as can be seen in the data from Statement 6, only one-third of the students participating in the IBC replied that reading the book had made them want to read more about the issues discussed in the book, while a full two-thirds replied that it did not.

Figure 2

Collective Percentage Showing IBC Project Participants' Responses to Statements 4, 5, and 6 Gathered through the Four Editions of the Survey

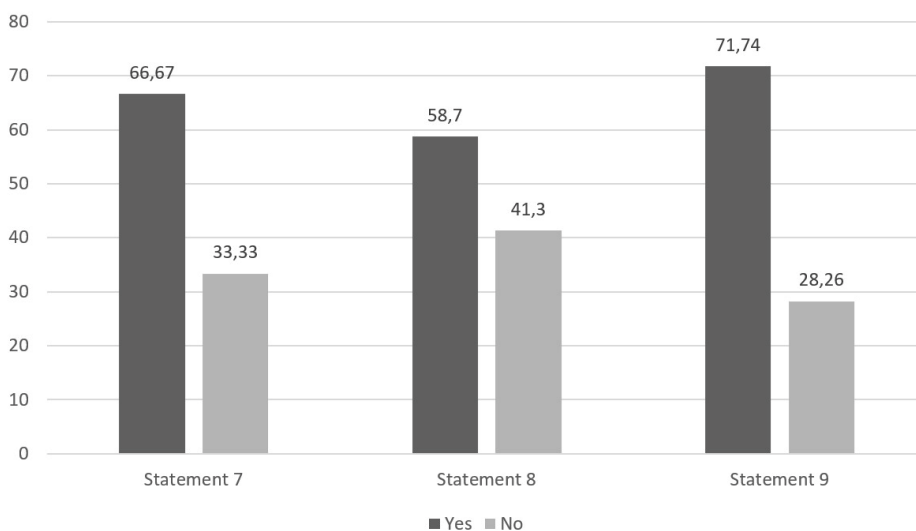


Analyzing the data, it is worthwhile to highlight that the students were more willing to share their impressions of the book with their friends (Statement 3) than with their family members (Statement 4). Nonetheless, the reasons explaining why less than half of the respondents discussed the book with their relatives go beyond the scope of this study as they pertain to the students' relationships with their families, an issue that was not examined in the survey. In addition, the low scores evidencing the participants' unwillingness to peruse are not stunning. According to the research conducted by the Polish National Library in March 2022, encompassing over 2000 respondents aged 15 and beyond, only 38% of the participants answered affirmatively to a question asking if they had read at least one book in a span of 12 months preceding the survey (Zasacka & Chymkowski). What is reassuring is that 45% of the Nysa students participating in the project responded that reading the book had encouraged them to read more, which surpassed the 2022 national readership average in Poland, proving the validity of the IBC project. Still, taking into account that only

one-third of the students replied that reading the book had made them want to read more about the issues discussed in the work clashes significantly with the numbers proving the students' general enjoyment (Statement 1) and thus raises further questions that should be encompassed in subsequent runs of the International Book Club.

Figure 3

Collective Percentage Showing IBC Project Participants' Responses to Statements 7, 8, and 9 Gathered through the Four Editions of the Survey



On the other hand, as the data in Figure 3 indicates, participating in the IBC can have a quite positive effect. As can be seen in Statement 7, a full two-thirds of participants felt that reading the selected text had caused them to explore ideas and issues that they might not have thought about otherwise. And while respondents may not have been motivated to read more about the subject, as indicated by Statement 6 above, members of the IBC did express that participation in the project had caused them to have a change of attitude toward the topic discussed in the book (Statement 8), which showcases a very satisfactory outcome of the project and evidences its validity. And finally, and perhaps most importantly, as Statement 9 denotes, almost 72% of the participants stated that participating in the club and reading the book helped them to understand the English language better, the claim proven through the questionnaire results interpreted in detail below.

Questionnaire Results

In order to delve deeper into the experiences and impressions of participants, a follow-up online questionnaire was administered to all participants of the IBC at the end of each edition's run. A total of nine open-ended questions were included in the questionnaire and participants were encouraged to give as complete answers as possible. The following discussion highlights the most salient responses for each of the four editions, including both positive and negative responses.

The Fall 2018 Edition

From October 2018 or January 2019, second-year students in the Department of Modern Languages at the University of Applied Sciences in Nysa participated in the first edition of the project by reading and discussing the book *Incarceration Nations* by Baz Dreisinger. At the end of the first edition, a questionnaire was administered to the 11 college participants regarding their experiences and impressions in reading *Incarceration Nations* and participating in the project.

All 11 respondents declared that the project should be continued due to several reasons. To begin with, some of the students felt that the project encouraged them to participate in discussion activities and having the opportunity to exchange opinions was important. Secondly, some of the participants enumerated the importance of the development of language skills, such as speaking, vocabulary, syntax, or reading comprehension. Finally, the students valued the fact that they discovered new issues and ideas which they were not familiar with.

When asked what the students had gained by taking part in the project, the responses were varied. To begin with, some respondents acknowledged that the project had broadened their viewpoints and enriched their knowledge. Moreover, there were students who admitted that they had read the first book in English in their lives. One student claimed that reading nowadays is not popular.

When asked to state whether public discussions on the issue were important, every student agreed that they were. One respondent explained that these issues have "a tremendous impact on the society" and thus people should focus on them. Another student stated: "it enables students to deliberate on the issues we usually don't think everyday." It was also claimed that nowadays "people read different books and that does not stimulate public discussion."

When asked how important for the students the online discussion based on the book was, every student stated it had been important. To justify their answers, the respondents indicated the opportunities to exchange the opinions with people from different parts of the world. One respondent summed it up nicely, stating: "The project enables the exchange of views with students from

a different part of the world, teaches us how to debate in a well-mannered way, and shapes our opinions on important issues that we usually neglect in everyday life.”¹

The Fall 2019 Edition

In February 2020, at the finish of the second edition of the project, 22 of the 36 first-year students who had completed the initial survey at the University of Applied Sciences in Nysa were administered the questionnaire to learn about their experience in reading and discussing *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* by William Kamkwamba and Bryan Mealer and their experiences in participating in the IBC project.

When asked to comment on whether the International Book Club should be continued, all but one student answered affirmatively. Positive comments about the project included such statements as “the project integrates students through conversations,” “is an excellent way to exchange opinions,” and “is a nice opportunity to exchange insights with people of other nationalities about the book.” One participant claimed that the “[p]roject made me read and finished first book in my life.” Another student added: “It is an interesting and fresh experience. It makes us break away and learn something new at the same time. Such reading not only enriches our English dictionary, but also the very knowledge of the world. In the case of such interesting books as *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*, which was not too boring, it was also suspenseful and touching. It was not such a typical standard *reading* book. It brought something to the head and heart.” On the negative side, the student who did not agree that the project should be continued stated that “the project does not introduce anything important into the studies’ program.”

When asked what the students had gained by taking part in the project, the answers were varied. Some students stressed the improvement of linguistic skills “both through reading and later discussions,” and “in speech and writing.” What is more, some of the students claimed that the experience had changed their ways of thinking with one claiming: “I am less prejudiced than I was before,” and another stating that “William’s story has taught me that it’s not worth giving up.” Several of the answers focused on raising awareness of the starvation issue discussed in the book. Finally, three respondents asserted that they were encouraged to read more books of different genres they used to read. Once again, on the negative side, the student who did not agree that the project should be continued claimed that they gained “completely nothing.”

¹ The responses given by the students participating in the project are quoted in the entire article as they were given, with no additional correction.

When asked in what way the book has changed the students' attitude to the issues mentioned in the book the answers were again varied. One student summed it up: "The book, written in the first person, gave the opportunity to empathize with a person who lives in that world and struggles with problems that we do not even assume that we could have, such as hunger, extreme poverty, lack of access to medicine and education."

When asked to state whether public discussion on the issue was important, the project participants agreed that it was. One student claimed that "only by talking about problems in public we are able to make a difference." Another student added that "[t]he topics covered in the book are quite heavy, so they should be discussed and analyzed." When asked what they had gained by taking part in online discussions, the participants stressed the importance of exchanging opinions. As one student stated, "the discussion was important because it helped me to look at the topic from different perspectives." Furthermore, two students stated that it was an enjoyable experience. Another respondent pointed out: "The book changed my attitude to education."

The Fall 2020 Edition

At the end of the third run of the project, the open-ended questionnaire was once again administered to 31 second-year students at the University of Applied Sciences in Nysa regarding their experiences in reading and studying *Broad Band: The Untold Story of the Women Who Made the Internet* by Claire L. Evans.

In response to whether the International Book Club should be continued, all students once again agreed that it should. The students highlighted the importance of international cooperation, discussion opportunities including the exchange of ideas, the development of language skills, and the opportunity to discover another culture. One student called the project "illuminative." Another student, in explaining their opinion, stated that "it forces students to read books that they might not have read themselves. Books are also about very valuable issues, broadening horizons." A different participant added: "It seems to me that the books we read are not very popular among people, but they are very interesting and show problems and people who are heroes because they changed the world and who we had no idea about."

When asked what they had gained by taking part in the project, the answers were numerous and varied. The students indicated that the project had developed both their language skills and knowledge of the discussed topic. One participant explained: "I believe that by participating in the project, I gained new knowledge both in terms of vocabulary and knowledge about women important for the scientific world and the whole world, and I also learned about many new games, computer programs, portals that I had not previously heard

about.” Another student asserted: “I have gained knowledge about the history that was not told to me in the history class when the topic was about the internet and the development of it. Moreover, I have gained better use of the English language and improved my pronunciation while expressing my thoughts, and myself so it helped me think critically about something I had read about and gave me the confidence to speak about it.”

When asked in what ways reading the book had changed their attitudes about the topic, the interviewed students underlined the importance of raising awareness of the topic. One student expressed: “The book shows how important women are, how much they have achieved, what they have created, so if they succeeded, why should I fail?” Another participant stated: “It completely changed my view of gender, I always thought it was a man’s job. That’s why I respect the woman who paved the way for other women in the computer industry.” A different student added: “I started to believe more in my abilities.”

When asked to state whether public discussions on the issue were important, every interviewed student agreed. One participant explained: “I believe they are very important. It’s the 21st century and women are still treated worse than men. They are insulted, harassed, do not have full civil rights or even human rights, and in the end they are treated as stupider, as those who cannot achieve more than a man. When a woman discovers something the man hasn’t done, she is relegated to the shadows. It is only a woman who is told what they can or cannot, what is right for them and what is not, a man is not forbidden to do anything, any of their behavior is justified. Therefore, in every possible way we should talk about inequality and fight against it.” A different student claimed that “[c]hanging perspectives and gender roles is important. Often these very problems are very harmful and prevent a person from developing. Through these stories it is possible to show that women are also gifted and full of ideas, even in areas that are attributed to men.” Finally, one student asserted, “Public discussions are important, because they concern me directly as a woman.”

When asked to enumerate what they had gained by taking part in the online discussion, the students stressed the opportunity of exchanging opinions and spotting different points of views. As one student explained, “The very idea of the project is very good and it certainly allows you to understand a different culture as well, because each nationality may have a different perspective on a given problem.”

The Fall 2021 Edition

The online questionnaire was routinely again administered at the end of the fourth run of the project to students from the University of Applied Sciences in Nysa. For this edition, 21 second-year students were queried about their experiences in reading and discussing *A Dream Called Home* by Reyna Grande.

When asked to comment on whether the International Book Club should be continued, 19 of the 21 students answered affirmatively. One student supported their response by stating “It’s a good practice. It extends the capacity of vocabulary and skills of critical thinking.” Another student underlined the significance of international cooperation, asserting that “It is a nice opportunity to exchange insights with people of other nationalities about the book, and we do not have such opportunities every day.” Another participant added, “I think that these projects are important because thanks to them we have the opportunity to learn the language in a way that is much more practical than normal reading books.” A different student explained: “This project should be continued due to the fact that its participants conduct intensive discussions on important topics also outside the classroom.” Finally, one student admitted that the project had caused them to read and finish the first book in their life. On the other hand, one student who was not in favor of continuing the project acknowledged, “It was a nice project with good intentions. However, I think next time the students should be able to pick the book for reading to make the club more interesting.” Another student added that different types of books ought to be selected, ones “that focused on more fictional and general topics so that they would appeal to everyone.”

When asked what the participants gained by taking part in the project, the vast majority of them enumerated its advantages. The arguments were the following: motivation to complete further work, redefinition of someone’s priorities, gaining courage to embrace difficult topics, an enrichment of vocabulary, and knowledge about the world. Moreover, the students underlined the significance of the development of their speaking skills that prepared them to participate in the class discussions. One student stated: “I believe that thanks to the project, I overcame my fear of English-language literature and I will not limit myself only to literature in Polish any longer, but I will start reading books in English too.” The only opposite opinion was the following: “I’m sorry to say that I gained completely nothing. Only good thing was that I was reading something which I’ve been trying to do for a long time. Unfortunately, the book choice made me less encouraged to read books.”

When asked in what ways reading a book changes students’ attitude about the topic, students in general acknowledged that they understood the issue more deeply. Furthermore, one student stated: “The book changed my attitude to education.” Another student explained: “Better understanding of the problems reflected in the book and most of all a real joy to have open and friendly discussion with other people (teachers/students).” On the other hand, there were some statements that the students gained nothing. For instance, one participant stated, “The book did not change my approach in any way. I don’t care about problems that don’t concern me.”

When asked in what way the book had changed the students' attitude to the problems mentioned in the book, the participants enumerated plenty of varied examples. Some students underlined the importance of appreciating their life, comparing it to the hardship presented in the book. One student claimed, "it made me realize there are other people which are in the way more worse situation than me." Another student stated that they began to appreciate their mother more. On the contrary two students pointed out that the issues presented in the book were biased: "[T]he opinions loosely based on her (the author's) prejudice towards everyone." The second student added: "As someone who experienced discrimination in Germany because of my Polish origins I felt really mad at author at some point because being white doesn't give any privileges and book made it look like it does."

When asked to state whether public discussions on the issue were important, every student agreed that they were. In order to justify their statement, one student explained: "It was very useful, and reading answers to questions from people from other countries, from other universities was both useful and enjoyable." Another student added: "It allowed me to get acquainted not only with the comments of students I see every day, but also of people from other parts of the world, which was very developing and broadened my point of view." To sum up, one student claimed that by talking about particular issues in public, people can make a difference.

When asked how important for the students the online discussion based on the book was, 17 out of 22 students stated that it was important. The students explained that the discussion was "interesting," "the topic was important," and "it [was] a good opportunity to train speaking skills." Finally, when asked to enumerate what the students had gained by taking part in the online discussion, the answers were varied. One student claimed: "The online discussion was an important part of the project for me, as I was able to see how many people were getting involved and sharing their opinions, as well as engaging in a conversation on a given topic." Another one added: "I really like the online discussion because it's a good opportunity to train listening skills while talking to students from abroad."

Discussion

Overall, based on the data gathered thus far, the International Book Club has proven to be a success, although some limitations remain. On the positive side, for the most part, participants in the program have enjoyed the experience of reading the book, with at least one student remarking that it caused them to

read a complete book for the first time in their life. More importantly, being a part of the International Book Club has caused participants to have more frequent, and perhaps more sustained, discussions with their classmates than they might otherwise have had. It has also caused them to think more deeply about the issues discussed in each year's selection than they normally would. The experience has also clearly caused many participants to have a change of attitude toward the subject through their reading and discussion of the book. Likewise, the experience of participating in the IBC has exposed them to diverse ways of thinking and learning, helping them to see the importance of the exchange of ideas and opinions. And clearly, based on answers from both the survey and the questionnaire, participation in the project has helped to improve the English language abilities of the members of the club. And since participation in the club exposed participants to books that they would not normally have access to, participation has also helped them become more familiar with English language literature.

Interestingly, although the International Book Club is indeed a "book" club, this improvement has not been limited to only an enhancement in reading comprehension ability, with various participants remarking that it has also helped them improve their speaking and listening in English, allowing them to engage more freely in conversations and discussions. Even more, as many participants remarked, it has helped them improve their grammatical competency and expand their vocabularies.

On the other hand, the limitations of the project must be recognized. While participation in the project clearly caused participants to have expanded and more in-depth discussions with fellow classmates, this effect did not seem to extend beyond the academic context, since respondents reported not having discussions outside of the classroom setting. Likewise, participation in the program does not seem to have caused a significant change in the reading habits of club members, since participants reported that they did not read more because of participation in the club. Both of these issues must be addressed in future editions of the project.

Conclusion

The aim of the present study was to detail the findings from the first four years of an ongoing, longitudinal study that delved into the experiences and perceptions of Polish college students as they participated in the common read experience called the International Book Club, which brought them together virtually with students from the United States, Mexico, Guatemala, Argentina,

the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. These early results show that participants in the project did benefit from the IBC program and that it had a positive effect on their reading experiences, helping them to delve deeper into, and have deeper discussions on, topics and issues that they normally would not be exposed to. This experience also clearly caused participants to experience changes in their attitudes toward these topics, exposing them to diverse points of view and belief systems. And significantly, it also clearly caused participants to experience an improvement in their English language abilities.

In addition, this research, through its analysis of the Polish context, is meant to expand the contexts in which common read programs are researched. Looking forward, future research needs to be extended into ever-increasing contexts, countries, and cultures, if we hope to gain a fuller understanding of the potential of common read programs. For our part, we have been convinced enough by the feedback that we have so far received from participants in our project to continue the International Book Club into the future, with participants in the Fall 2023 edition reading *Sitting Pretty: The View From My Ordinary Resilient Disabled Body* by Rebekah Taussig.

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Appendix

Table 1*The Fall 2018 Edition: Second-year College Students' Responses to the Project*

Statements	YES	NO
I enjoyed reading <i>Incarceration Nations</i> .	6	5
I would recommend <i>Incarceration Nations</i> to others.	9	2
I talked to my friends about <i>Incarceration Nations</i> outside of class.	8	3
I talked to my family about <i>Incarceration Nations</i> outside of class.	4	7
Reading <i>Incarceration Nations</i> encouraged me to read more.	5	6
Reading <i>Incarceration Nations</i> has made me want to read more about this subject.	4	7
Reading <i>Incarceration Nations</i> caused me to explore ideas and issues that I might not have thought about otherwise.	10	1
Reading <i>Incarceration Nations</i> caused me to have a change in attitude toward the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated.	10	1
Reading <i>Incarceration Nations</i> has helped me understand English better.	6	5

Table 2*The Fall 2019 Edition: First-year Students' Responses to the Project*

Statements	YES	NO
I enjoyed reading <i>The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind</i> .	24	12
I would recommend <i>The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind</i> to others.	28	8
I talked to my friends about <i>The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind</i> outside of class.	26	10
I talked to my family about <i>The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind</i> outside of class.	16	20
Reading <i>The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind</i> encouraged me to read more.	21	15
Reading <i>The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind</i> has made me want to read more about this subject.	14	22
Reading <i>The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind</i> caused me to explore ideas and issues that I might not have thought about otherwise.	26	10
Reading <i>The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind</i> caused me to have a change in attitude toward education.	24	12
Reading <i>The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind</i> has helped me understand English better.	31	5

Table 3*The Fall 2019 Edition: Second-year Students' Responses to the Project*

Statements	YES	NO
I enjoyed reading <i>The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind</i> .	17	6
I would recommend <i>The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind</i> to others.	17	6
I talked to my friends about <i>The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind</i> outside of class.	15	8
I talked to my family about <i>The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind</i> outside of class.	12	11
Reading <i>The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind</i> encouraged me to read more.	9	14
Reading <i>The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind</i> has made me want to read more about this subject.	5	18
Reading <i>The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind</i> caused me to explore ideas and issues that I might not have thought about otherwise.	14	9
Reading <i>The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind</i> caused me to have a change in attitude toward education.	14	9
Reading <i>The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind</i> has helped me understand English better.	16	7

Table 4*The Fall 2020 Edition: Second-year Students' Responses to the Project*

Statements	YES	NO
I enjoyed reading <i>Broad Band</i> .	20	11
I would recommend <i>Broad Band</i> to others.	24	7
I talked to my friends about <i>Broad Band</i> outside of class.	19	12
I talked to my family about <i>Broad Band</i> outside of class.	13	18
Reading <i>Broad Band</i> encouraged me to read more.	17	14
Reading <i>Broad Band</i> has made me want to read more about this subject.	14	17
Reading <i>Broad Band</i> caused me to explore ideas and issues that I might not have thought about otherwise.	25	6
Reading <i>Broad Band</i> caused me to have a change in attitude toward education.	16	15
Reading <i>Broad Band</i> has helped me understand English better.	23	8

Table 5*The Fall 2021 Edition: Second-year Students' Responses to the Project*

Statements	YES	NO
I enjoyed reading <i>A Dream Called Home</i> .	11	10
I would recommend <i>A Dream Called Home</i> to others.	9	12
I talked to my friends about <i>A Dream Called Home</i> outside of class.	14	7
I talked to my family about <i>A Dream Called Home</i> outside of class.	7	14
Reading <i>A Dream Called Home</i> encouraged me to read more.	1	20
Reading <i>A Dream Called Home</i> has made me want to read more about this subject.	2	19
Reading <i>A Dream Called Home</i> caused me to explore ideas and issues that I might not have thought about otherwise.	7	14
Reading <i>A Dream Called Home</i> caused me to have a change in attitude toward education.	7	14
Reading <i>A Dream Called Home</i> has helped me understand English better.	11	10

Agnieszka Irena Kaczmarek, Emerson Case, Sebastian Zatylny

Lesen, Diskutieren und Teilen: Gründung einer lebhaften übernationalen Online-Lerngemeinschaft durch den internationalen Buchclub

Zusammenfassung

Die vorliegende Arbeit berichtet über die Ergebnisse der ersten vier Jahre einer fortlaufenden Längsschnittstudie, in der Erfahrungen und Wahrnehmungen polnischer Teilnehmer an dem internationalen Buchclub – einer Erweiterung eines gemeinsamen Leseprogramms an einer amerikanischen Universität, unter die Lupe genommen wurden. Im Einzelnen wurde die Leseerfahrung der Teilnehmer untersucht, sowohl innerhalb als auch außerhalb des Klassenzimmers, ihre Meinung und Einstellung zu den im Rahmen der jährlich gewählten Bücher behandelten Themen und ob sich diese Einstellung durch ihre Erfahrung geändert hat oder nicht, bzw. ihre Einstellung zur öffentlichen Diskussion und ob sich diese Einstellung durch ihre Erfahrung geändert hat oder nicht, sowie die Frage, ob die Buchlektüre und die Teilnahme am Club zur Verbesserung ihrer Englischkenntnisse beigetragen haben oder nicht. Es wurden quantitative Daten in Form eines Fragebogens mit neun Stellungnahmen und qualitative Daten in Form eines Fragebogens mit neun offenen Fragen gesammelt und ausgewertet. Während ein großer Teil der Literatur über gemeinsame Leseprogramme die Erfahrungen der Teilnehmer im nordamerikanischen Kontext behandelt hat, gibt es immer noch einen Mangel an Forschung außerhalb dieses Kontextes, einschließlich des polnischen Kontextes. Die vorliegende Studie versucht, diese Lücke zu schließen. Die wichtigsten Ergebnisse der Studie zeigen, dass die Teilnehmer ihre Leseerfahrung insgesamt genossen haben und dass die Teilnahme an

dem Programm für sie von Vorteil war. Sie wurden unter anderem dazu gebracht, mehr zu lesen, sich mehr an Diskussionen zu beteiligen, tiefer über verschiedene Themen und Fragen nachzudenken und, was vielleicht am wichtigsten ist, ihre Englischkenntnisse zu verbessern.

Schlüsselwörter: gemeinsame Leseprogramme, internationaler Buchclub