

## **Fostering belonging: an interdisciplinary journal club**

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### ***Presentation abstract***

This session explored the evolution of an interdisciplinary journal club open to undergraduate and master's students, the challenges faced, and how we plan to develop the project going forward.

The aim of the club is to empower students through an initial staff-led workshop, followed by student-led peer-to-peer discussion sessions, developing their confidence in group working (and indirectly meeting new people), critical reading and analysis. The club also provides the opportunity to analyse and interpret statistical data, an area that can be daunting for students (Mezgebe et al., 2019). Articles for discussion in the club are chosen to be accessible to students from all disciplines, with a focus, where possible, on aspects of equity, diversity and inclusion. Collaboration between different facets of our learning development team allow our librarian and our writing, maths and statistics advisers to bring their specific expertise to the initiative, resulting in a holistic approach, additionally underpinned by students' increased ownership.

Impact has been measured through pre- and post-participation surveys\*, with mostly positive comments, touching on benefits beyond the obvious 'skills development', most notably participation being seen to instil a sense of connection and belonging with fellow students, contributing to students' sense of wellbeing and the appreciation of having a space to explore learning outside of the core assessed curriculum.

We hoped to tap into delegates' experiences of any similar initiatives and explore possibilities for further developing our initiative, which could include embedding subject-specific clubs within course programmes (i.e. empowering academic staff to facilitate these) with the aim of further enhancing a sense of belonging across the institution. Equally, the model we have developed is adaptable to different contexts, so we would encourage delegates to consider the potential for adaptation to their institutional contexts.

\*Ethical approval has been obtained to use survey responses for research.

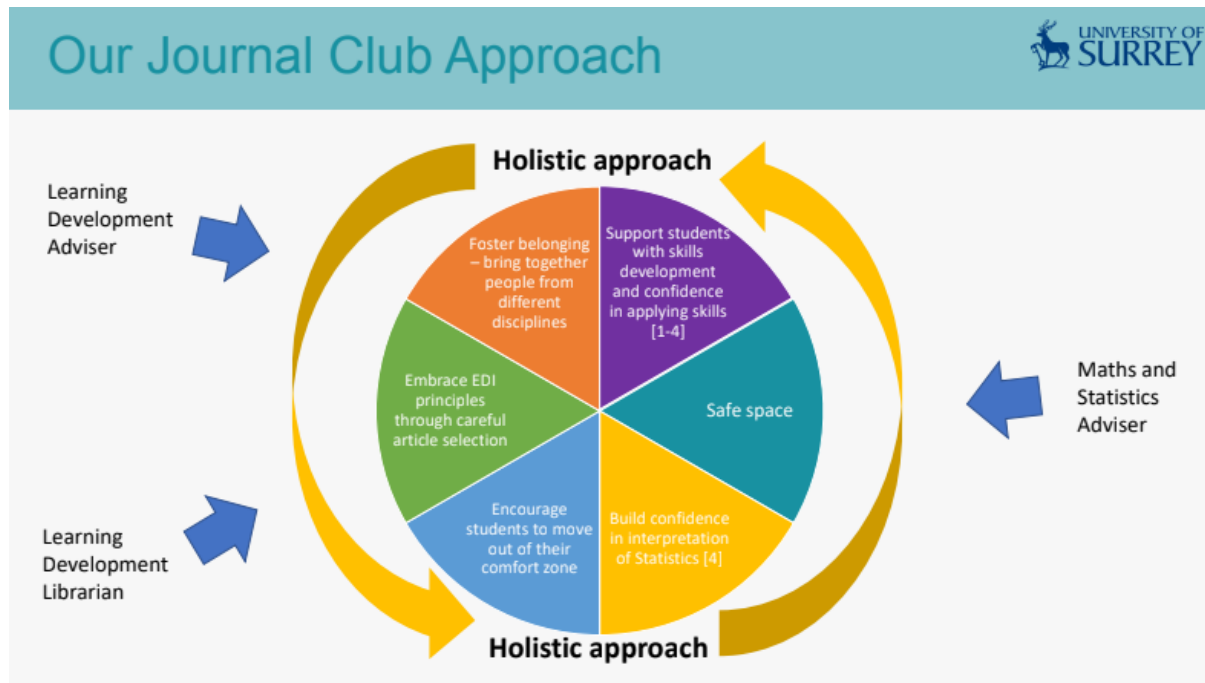
**Keywords:** journal club; interdisciplinary; belonging; collaborative skills.

### ***Community response***

The audience at the session comprised a mix of colleagues who run either interdisciplinary or subject-specific journal clubs at their institutions and those who do not but might be interested in launching such initiatives. Among those who had experience with journal clubs, there was agreement that not only was the initiative 'positive for the team's profile' but also that the clubs increased a sense of belonging and community (Figure 1). It was equally positive to see that student club members reported that they had developed additional professional qualities, such as connecting and collaborating with others, and 'strongly agreed' that the journal club meetings helped them gain confidence in sharing their own perspectives while being able to hear and understand those of others better. Inspired by the discussion, one participant commented:

We have not run a club, but want to! Our 'unpacking journal articles' webinars have been very positively received. We have plans but need to work out logistics and promotion, which can be a huge challenge.

Indeed, this challenge was expressed by the presenters themselves, as they confessed that planning sessions in a way that would accommodate everyone's needs proved one of the key contributors to student attrition. Nonetheless, the potential held by such clubs warrants efforts to keep looking for best solutions.

**Figure 1. Presenters' slide: the journal club approach.**

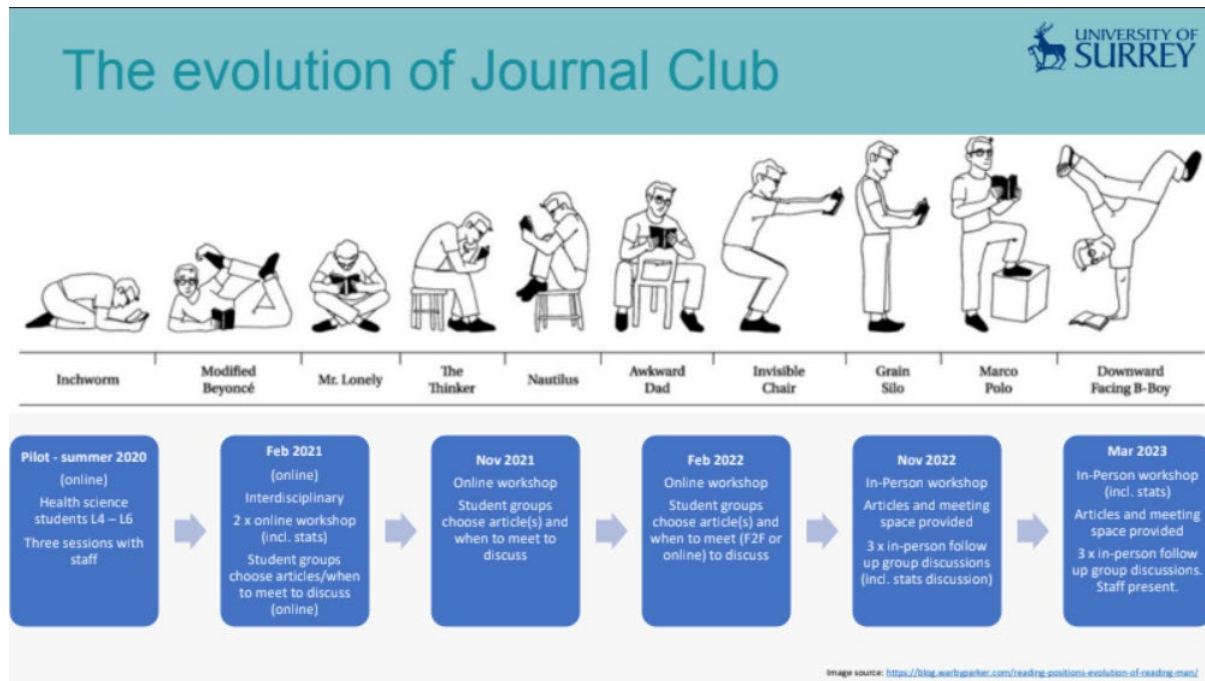
The evolution of the journal club at the University of Surrey, imaginatively represented in one of the presenters' slides (Figure 2), combined with the challenges of running it (which include retention, small numbers, providing the right level of staff involvement, as well as logistics), provoked questions around how to develop the club in future. The responses from the audience included the following reflections and recommendations:

We have a mix of university students and NHS staff within the same sessions.

We mix student peer-to-peer discussion and staff-led discussion.

Maybe use student mentors to lead the sessions? More peer run but with a designated lead (we do that!).

Subject specific papers boost student confidence because they have some familiarity with the topic.

**Figure 2. Presenters' slide: the evolution of the Journal Club.**

### Next steps and additional questions

Clearly, the format of the journal club is a promising, if challenging, proposition to engage students in the development of their learning and higher order thinking skills. The scholarship on the topic (Deenadayalan et al., 2008) seems to indicate that a strong disciplinary focus helps with student engagement; therefore, partnering with academic tutors in running such sessions might be a productive approach. Some journal clubs even experiment with extending club conversations to social media (Topf et al., 2017).

Other suggestions involve harnessing learning development-specific approaches, such as text mapping and scrolling (Abegglen et al., 2019), not only to offer a more tangible and light-hearted element (than, for example, a more intense discussion), but also to help students develop reading skills and embrace more inclusive approaches to text analysis. Finally, adopting specific formats for sessions such as 'reading circles' (Gee, 2014), might stimulate deeper engagement and stir additional enthusiasm for the club meetings. These more hands-on approaches would also alleviate the issue of the lack of participant preparation, which in small groups (as the student feedback indicated) carries the risk of derailing the entire conversation.

As there is not one most effective model of running journal clubs (Deenadayalan et al., 2008), experimenting with different formats and processes may offer a chance to appeal to the greatest number of students and generate sustained engagement. It will be great to see how this initiative develops in future.

### ***Authors' reflections***

It was incredibly useful to receive feedback from learning development colleagues on our journal club initiative and to hear how others had approached similar projects within their own institutions. It was both surprising and reassuring to see that some participants had adopted an interdisciplinary approach, and this is certainly something we would like to continue in future, incorporating some of the excellent audience suggestions such as having student mentors facilitate discussions. This is something we plan to explore in the next academic year.

The in-session responses and community response also support our desire to explore more subject-specific and embedded versions of the journal club in future. We were inspired by other sessions at the conference that outlined different approaches to group reading and text analysis and will incorporate elements of these moving forward. The literature and audience responses both support the idea that a disciplinary focus can help to build students' confidence, and this will help to alleviate some of the challenges we have faced with an interdisciplinary approach.

While there are several things that we will change and develop based on the feedback received, it was heartening that participants who had not run journal clubs previously were interested in applying some of our ideas in their own institutions. We would be happy to discuss how we have approached our own model with anyone who may wish to explore implementing something similar and share developments in our practice with the Learning Development community in future.

### ***Acknowledgments***

Thank you to all the contributors who shared their reflections and enriched our insight into this conference presentation and its impact on the audience.

The authors did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

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