



The role of women's reading groups

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ABSTRACT

The women's reading group has played different roles throughout history: as a vehicle for education and self-improvement; as a place to network and build social capital; as a political space in which to discuss feminism and reflect on female identity. In this opinion piece the author considers how a contemporary example of a women's reading group at the University of the Highlands and Islands performs many of these historical functions.

Keywords: gender representation, imposter syndrome, women, reading groups

Introduction

Women's book groups and reading circles are not a new phenomenon. Although the rise of the 'modern' women's book group in the UK and USA occurred in the 1990s, American women's 'literary circles' can be traced to the seventeenth century with Bible reading groups for women even pre-dating these (Craig, 2019, pp. 132-133). The women's reading group has played different roles throughout these periods: as a vehicle for education and self-improvement; as a place to network and build social capital; as a political space in which to discuss feminism and reflect on female identity. In this opinion piece I consider how a contemporary example of the women's reading group at the University of the Highlands and Islands performs many of these historical functions.

The UHI context

The University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) is a federated institution made up of 13 colleges and research institutions across the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. The women's reading group is one of the activities that has emerged from the creation of a Women's Network in 2018, itself a result of conversations had at the University's celebration of International Women's Day in that same year. The aim of the network was to allow women to come together and explore the challenges they face in Further and Higher Education. Alongside Network meetings with relevant speakers, a reading group was identified as a natural way of achieving this aim. Meeting once or twice each year, the group has focused on reading feminist texts that address women's role in education in some way. As a geographically dispersed institution, the reading group has met virtually, even before COVID-19, using video conferencing software to connect colleagues at our different sites. Group meetings are used to explore readers' reactions to these texts and to discuss any specific implications for women at UHI.

The different roles of the women's reading group

Women's reading groups blossomed in the UK and the USA during the late nineteenth century, due to an increase in literacy (primarily amongst the middle and upper classes) in both nations and as the result of local cultural changes (for example, the rise of women's self-reliance after the Civil War in the USA). These groups were a vehicle for women's self-improvement and education at a time when they were excluded from the formal academic or professional spaces in which this would usually occur. These 'literary circles' were described as "a way for women to pursue truth, knowledge, and an understanding of themselves and the world around them." (McHugh, 2020).

Later, as women gained access to education the women's reading group became more explicitly associated with feminism. These 'consciousness raising' (CR) groups of the 1960s provided a space for women to reflect on how sexism affected them personally, and to discuss female identity. Burger (2015) places these groups firmly within the Second Wave feminist movement which focused on the empowerment of individual women ('The personal is political' (Hanisch, 1969)) rather than on the broader legal fights of the First Wave (e.g. votes for women).

Contemporary reading groups which blossomed in the 1990s have largely involved the reading of fiction. Many have been popularised by celebrities (Richard and Judy's book club in the UK, Oprah Winfrey and Reece Witherspoon in the USA). The expansion of the book group to an audience of millions has meant that a celebrity recommendation can result in significant sales for authors (Hall, 2003, p. 647). Whilst these groups are open to men as well as women, 64% of reading group members are part of women-only groups (Hartley and Turvey, 2002) and surveys indicate that women read far more fiction than men (Weiner, 2007).

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The role of these contemporary groups is in part social but has also been characterized as a form of self-discovery, self-help or therapy, with the 'Oprahfication' of the book group partly responsible for this due to the host's intimate style of delivery and sharing of her own personal stories (Hall, 2003).

The reading group at UHI

Reflecting on these different incarnations of the women's reading group, I can see that our reading group at UHI still performs several of these historical functions.

Whilst women now have access to education, and our reading group takes place within a university, there is still a desire for group members to improve themselves intellectually. Our members are women in academic and professional services roles for whom reading and scholarship should be part of their work. However, it is evident from group discussions that they do not have enough time to pursue activities such as reading and writing journal articles or other scholarly outputs. Rarely, is there enough time during the working day to engage in scholarship, furthermore, women are more likely to work part-time meaning the opportunity to engage in these activities during work is reduced compared to their male counterparts. Women also assume the greater share of domestic and childcare tasks at home so scholarly reading and writing are unlikely to take place there either. Evidence suggests that women scholars were disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Guardian, 2020, Ucar et al., 2022) with their rates of submission of journal articles decreasing whilst those of men increased, largely due to women assuming even more domestic tasks than they did pre-COVID. The reading group gives women access to an achievable amount of scholarship (reading one text, twice each year) and the meetings take place during work hours meaning they are accessible for members regardless of domestic responsibilities.

As we focus on feminist readings (non-fiction in the main), there is certainly a political function to the reading group. Readings have often described sexist phenomena (texts we have read include *Invisible Women* by Caroline Criado Perez, *Women and Power: A Manifesto* by Mary Beard and *Why Women are Blamed for Everything* by Dr Jessica Taylor) and inevitably group discussions centre around recounting their personal experience of sexism. And whilst not yet an activist group, we have focused on aspects of the texts relating to education which has prompted discussion about what can and should be done to erase these causes and symptoms of sexism.

Inevitably there is also a social aspect to the group, and we have created a community of women that would not have otherwise met. An unintended consequence of this is that it has led to professional collaborations outside of the group, assisted by the fact that the group is led by a member of the university's Learning and Teaching Academy (LTA), a central unit to support and enhance learning, teaching and scholarship. It is part of the LTA's remit to encourage and support collaboration, but the forging of personal connections between reading group members has provided an additional catalyst for these.

The women's reading group at UHI has therefore combined some of the historical functions of such groups. Our members have engaged in scholarship and self-improvement and have become politically aware by creating a shared understanding of feminism and issues relating to women within UHI. Through connecting informally with colleagues, members have also forged relationships of trust which has resulted in closer working outside of the reading group. Whilst this connection is particularly valuable within an institution as dispersed as UHI, these benefits could also be realised within other university and college environments, where collaborating across faculties and other sub-institutional divisions is often uncommon.

There is less of a focus on self-discovery in our women's reading group perhaps because this is more likely to be prompted by works of fiction. However, I personally feel freer to be a feminist within an all-women reading group and to express feminist views. Not only are these more likely to be validated by other women, but there is a certain subversiveness to holding the opinion that the fight for women's equality is not yet over. At UHI the women's reading group has provided a first step to activism in raising individuals' awareness of issues of gender bias in education and in discussing the wider societal context for these. This consciousness-raising aspect of the reading group has led us to work with the broader women's network to lobby for changes that will make our own university a more equitable workplace (for example, by requesting a menopause policy). The reading group has established a cohort of colleagues with a shared purpose, who are informed about feminist issues in education, and who are working together to make positive changes. It is an uncomfortable truth that despite the Equal Pay Act of 1970 and the Equality Act of 2010, there still remains a gender pay gap and an underrepresentation of women in senior management in UK universities (UCEA, 2022). The women's reading group, and women's movement more generally, is needed more than ever on our campuses.

Biography

Heather Fotheringham is Evidence-based Enhancement Lead at the University of the Highlands and Islands. She has a PhD in Philosophy from the University of Leeds and has worked in teaching, research, staff development and quality enhancement.

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