#BIT15Reads: Building a Participatory Learning Community of Professional Readers

Foreword

The minute I finished my M.Ed. in teacher-librarianship I went into mourning as I struggled to rebuild my own professional learning without the structure of tuition, professors and deadlines. I made a promise to not rush into anything and to breathe but still the longing to share with a learning community was ever present.

I attended the Educational Computing Organization of Ontario (ECOO) annual conference in 2014 (#BIT14) and reconnected with my tribe of people who are highly engaged with technology's role in education, and to my surprise and delight they were offering a session on danah boyd's book "It's Complicated" (2014). The session ran as a discussion panel of teachers who responded to some prepared questions. Everyone in the audience was encouraged to ask their own questions and the ideas exchanged were free-flowing.

After the session and a spirited discussion, #BIT15Reads was born. The aim of any book club was to build a community of readers but what if those readers, who were all involved in education and technology, could only meet once per year? Thus began a social experiment to build an online book club of professionals involved in technology's role in education. The goal of this book club is to build and sustain a community of readers interested in technology's role in education.

As with so many other opportunities in my life, #BIT15Reads was not planned but grew organically out of my meagre six years of teacher-librarianship; running book clubs for students; a lifelong love of reading; my social media habits; and informal research in participatory culture. I have also witnessed firsthand the difficulty of creating online dynamics as I teach grade 12 English each year in an elearning format. This participatory culture is key to the learning commons model of *Leading Learning* (CLA Voices for School Libraries Network, & CLA School Libraries Advisory Committee 2014) and involves a significant shift in philosophy, design and facilitation to achieve.

The risk of starting this new venture with a large group of exceptionally talented educators was not to be taken lightly. To have the opportunity to practice a professional participatory culture continues to be enticing despite the risks. I want the experience to be not only valuable but compelling for all participants. Part of the design of participatory culture is to empower the participants. This is done through inclusion and choice, multiple feedback loops and the encouragement of a democratic philosophy of flexible response to this feedback.

Reaching out for support

My first step was to try to develop a comprehensive list of books that would appeal to a wide variety of interests in the field. I thought I would try to model the CBC Canada Reads project, where we would whittle down a large list into a smaller one as books were reviewed. I also wanted to make sure that these books were as relevant and well-researched as danah boyd's example. I scoured reviews and

solicited recommendations from the ECOO community. Then I began approaching publishers for review copies. You'd be surprised what people will give you when you are willing to take the time to read and review their work. By August 2015, I had contacted 23 publishers successfully soliciting 39 copies of books for our review.

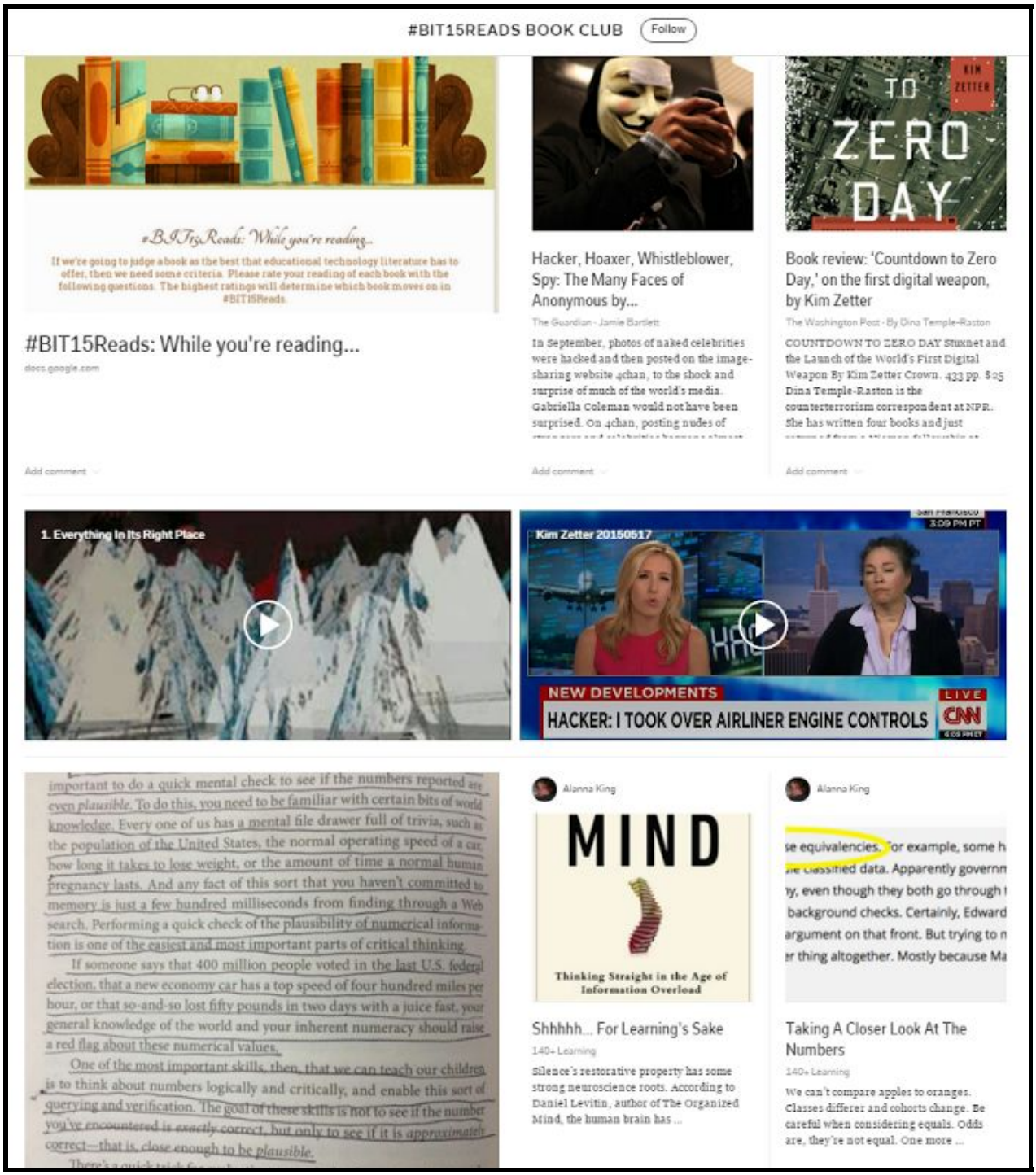
	A	B	E
1	Book Details		Author Details
2	Title	ISBN	Name
3	Dragnet Nation: A Quest for Privacy, Security, and Freedom in a World of Relentless Surveillance	805098070	Julia Angwin
4	The Second Machine Age: Work, Progress, and Prosperity in a Time of Brilliant Technologies	393239357	Erik Brynjolfsson, Andrew McAfee
5	The Glass Cage: Automation and Us	393240762	Nicholas Carr
6	Geek Sublime: The Beauty of Code, the Code of Beauty	1555976859	Vikram Chandra
7	Leading the Learning Revolution: The Expert's Guide to Capitalizing on the Exploding Lifelong Education Market	814432255	Jeff Cobb
8	Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The Many Faces of Anonymous	1781685835	Gabriella Coleman
9	Applications of Flow in Human Development and Education: The Collected Works of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi	9401790930	Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi
10	The Innovators: How a Group of Hackers, Geniuses and Geeks Created the Digital Revolution	147670869X	Walter Isaacson
11	Disconnected: Youth, New Media, and the Ethics Gap	262028069	Carrie James, Henry Jenkins (Foreword)
12	Motivating and Retaining Online Students: Research-Based Strategies That Work	1118531701	Rosemary M. Lehman, Simone C.O. Conceição
13	The Organized Mind: Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload	052595418X	Daniel J. Levitin
14	Invent To Learn: Making, Tinkering, and Engineering in the Classroom	989151107	Sylvia Libow Martinez, Gary S. Stager
15	From Master Teacher to Master Learner	1942496079	Will Richardson
16	Dataclysm: Who We Are (When We Think No One's Looking)		Christian Rudder
17	Digital Leadership: Changing Paradigms for Changing Times		Eric C. Sheninger
18	Conquering the Content: A Blueprint for Online Course Design and Development		Robin M Smith
19	Spin: How Politics Has the Power to Turn Marketing on Its Head	1770893172	Clive Veroni
20	This Is Not A Test: A New Narrative on Race, Class, and Education	1608463702	Jose Vilson
21	The Art of Tinkering		Karen Wilkinson, Mike Petrich
22	Countdown to Zero Day: Stuxnet and the Launch of the World's First Digital Weapon		Kim Zetter
23	How We Learn: The Surprising Truth About When, Where, and Why It Happens	812984293	Benedict Carey

One of the reasons that publishers were so forthcoming, I'm sure, is because of the promise of our online professional community to openly review these books.

Online opportunities and challenges

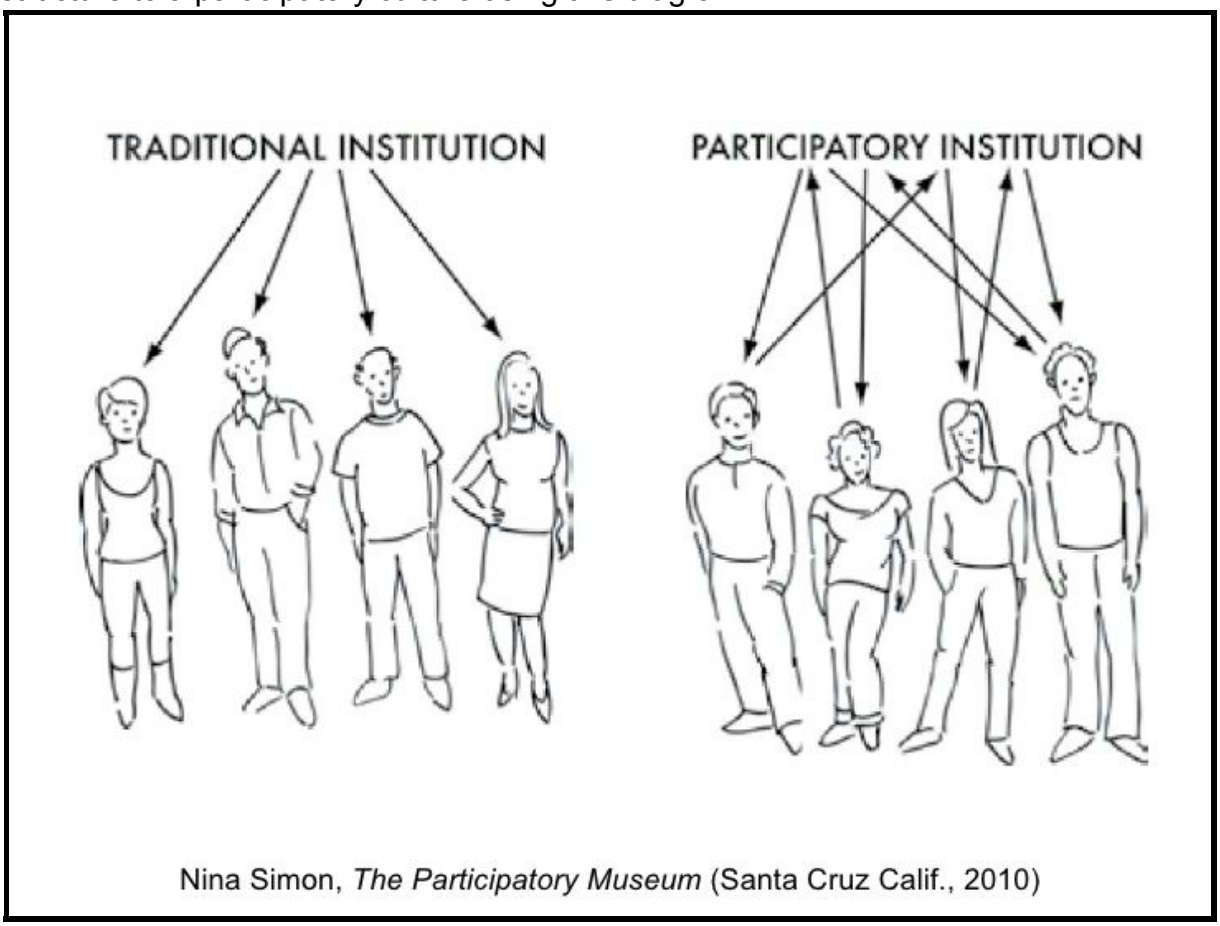
The old adage “If you build it, they will come” is not necessarily true, as anyone who has ever built an online presence can attest to. Yet even with my first tweet to announce the existence of #BIT15Reads, I had a positive response:

In the tweet activity above, you can see that 261 people saw this particular tweet. I tweeted this same message to any person who had been involved in the 2014 ECOO conference the previous year, using the information found on the popular conference site Lanyrd. By September 12, in just 2 weeks, we had 63 members from Ontario, Quebec, British Columbia and beyond in Jordan and New Zealand. The response was astounding and I became convinced that I was going to miss an important tweet or mention. I reached again into my digital toolbox and found Flipboard, an aggregator that lets you read by your search term. So I searched #BIT15Reads and turned the results into a Flipboard magazine with a unique URL:



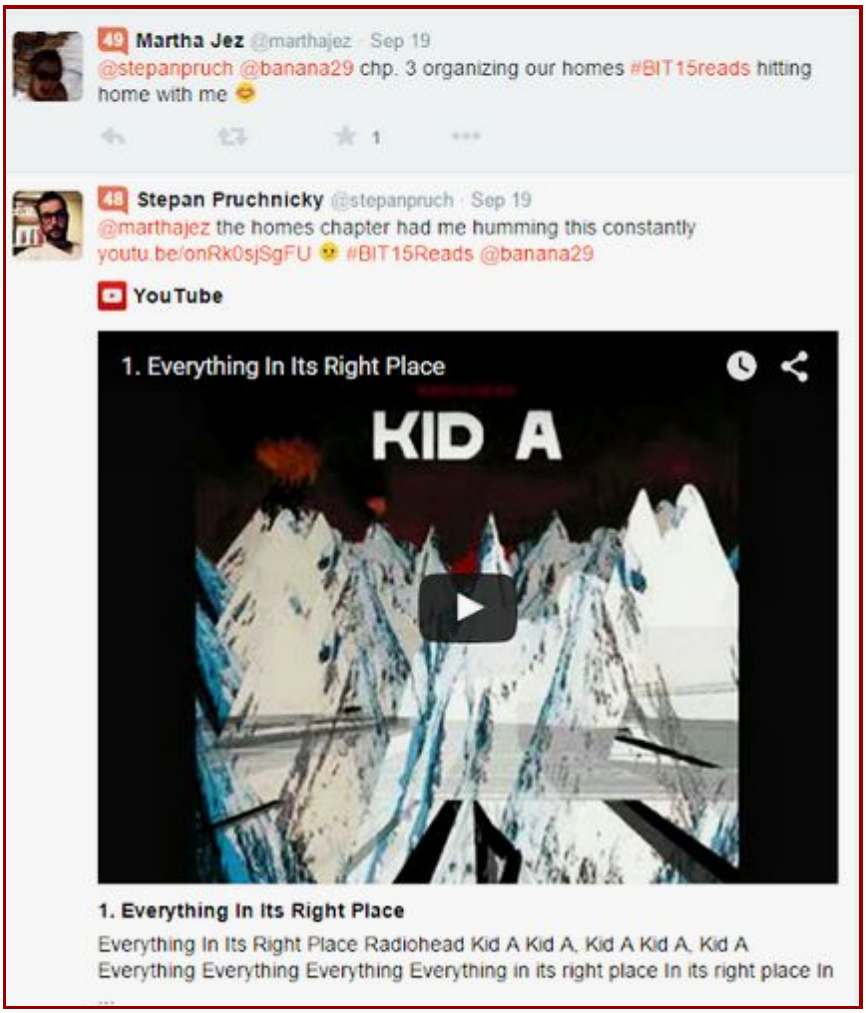
I ambitiously believed that participants would read a book per month and then review them in a visible way. Soliciting these reviews was more difficult than I thought so I moved to micro-blogging as a way to engage participants. Jenkins et al. (2013) remark that "Working with social networking tools altered the community dynamics--including leading to a shift in who spoke, and about what, and why" (p.37) when speaking about using social media tools to create a participatory culture in a classroom. The same is true in moving our annual face-to-face conference to an online forum in that different personas developed online. Being a reluctant leader myself, I wanted to create a completely democratic feeling where each participant has a stake in the books chosen, when discussions happen, etc. Yet I felt the

traditional imperative from my drama teaching days telling me to keep the momentum going, create content by myself and to force dynamics. The results of this imperative though are quite like when you accept a student's assignment and know that the parents helped too much with its completion. It feels forced, artificial and too polished. Embracing the messiness of the participatory process continues to be my challenge. Nina Simon (2010), too, talks about this moving from a traditional structure to a participatory culture using this diagram:



Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum* (Santa Cruz Calif., 2010)

When teaching reading to my students, I encourage them to notice the connections they're making to other texts. In one of these natural moments of emerging participatoryculture, book club participants Stepan Pruchnicky and Martha Jez connected to each other through music:



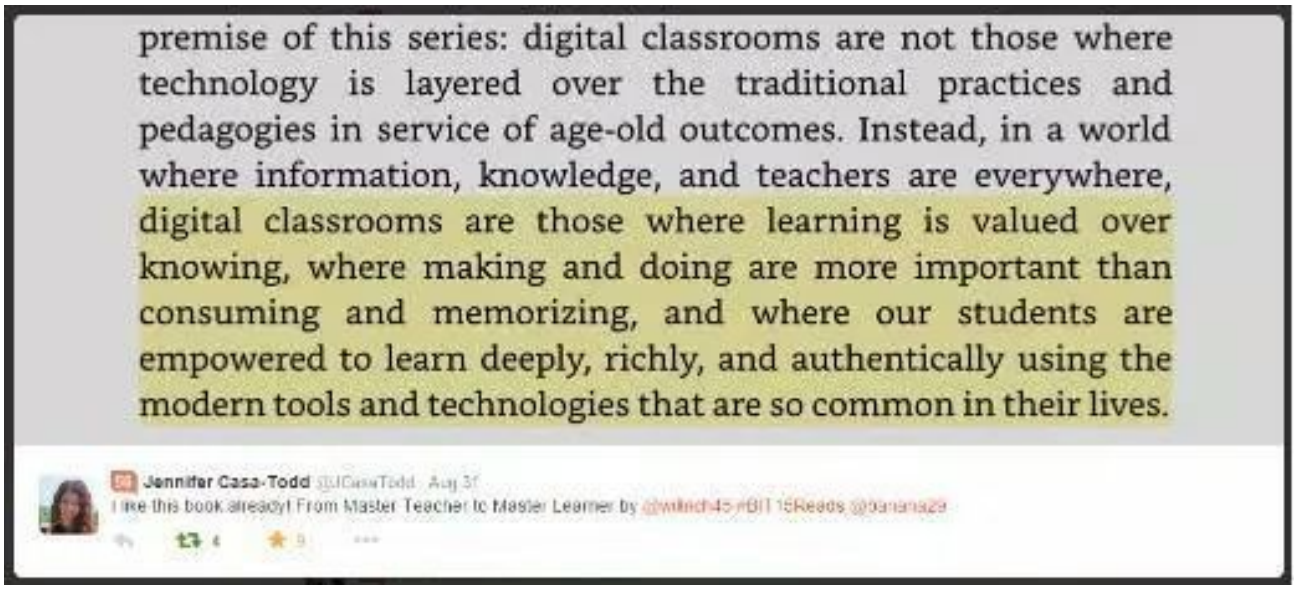
This beautiful example of connection is exactly what I was hoping for and to highlight it I devoted an entire blog post to it.

Twitter is great for finding community through hashtags, and for real-time reactions, but I wanted additional resources to create a place with some longevity and depth. Twitter became the signpost to point book club members to our private spaces for discussion.

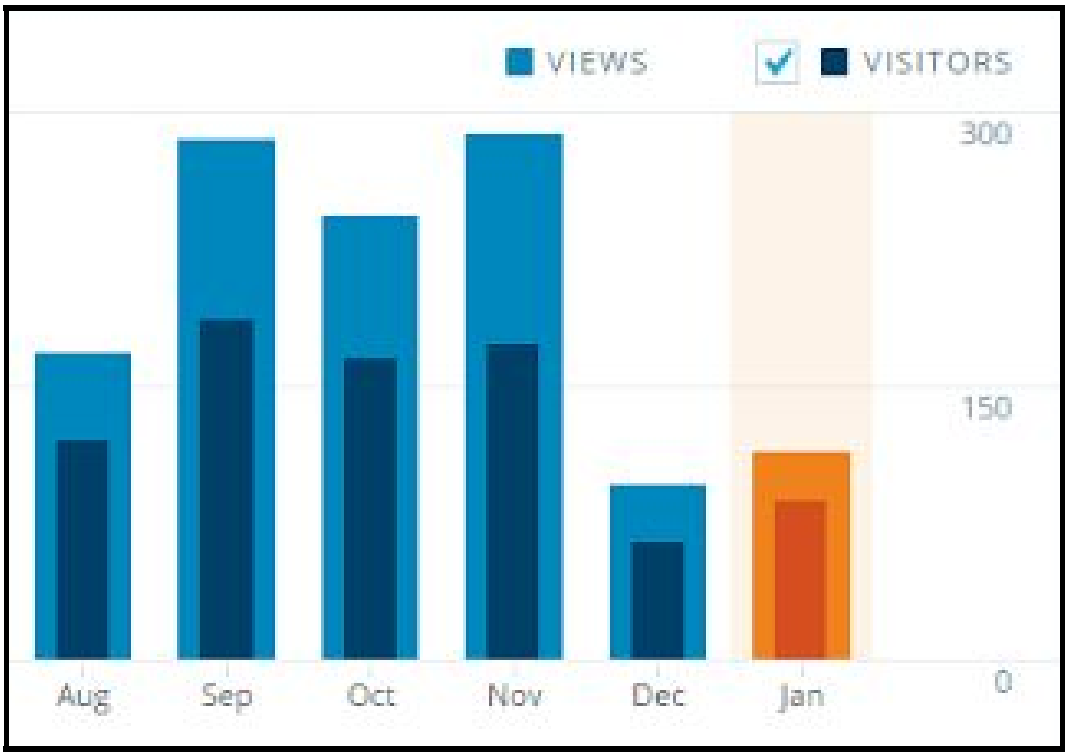
I chose Goodreads as it is the best tool I have found so far to connect with other book readers, and it keeps track of your reading while allowing you to see what your friends are reading. As a club organizer, this platform allows for an unlimited number of group members, including authors, and an organized method to have multiple discussion streams, and links out to other media. What it doesn't do well is bring people into the space and overall, I'm not sure that I will make the choice to have a private group in a closed network again. Perhaps the key is to connect members within another social networking platform that they're already using like Facebook.

If members engaged with our Goodreads private club then they were notified of our weekly online video conferences using Google Hangouts on Air. The software allows you to both livestream your Hangout (which I embedded into the Wordpress blog) and also to record the Hangout which is then stored on YouTube. Here is our very first and very informal hangout which had 8 people join in from Ontario and BC: https://youtu.be/a9PHONZzbPo My analytics in YouTube tell me that 31 people have watched the playback.

I continued to try to adapt to these challenges without overwhelming the participants so I also involved tools like my own Wordpress blog which I could easily push to other social media networks. I experimented with ways to use multiple media types to begin discussion and engage the participants. Book club participant Jennifer-Casa Todd captured her e-reader and used it to highlight a quote, saying in her tweet “I like this book already!”:



In the end, my Wordpress blog seemed to be the best way to reach the participants. It uses metatags for curation that are then searchable and I can totally control the page structure and it’s organization. I’ve set it up almost like a book so that the current activity is on the front page and the appendices of curated lists are on subsequent pages. It’s also very shareable on social media and these tools are built in everywhere. You can see in the graph below that over the course of our launch to the conference that the Wordpress blog received a significant boost in traffic.



Participants had the opportunity to participate in 5 Google hangouts in the 10 weeks of the book club. Based purely on Goodreads activity, I was able to get our booklist down to our top 12 by early October.

Author engagement

Having reached out to each author using social media and gauging their willingness to engage with our book club, I realized that their involvement would have a huge impact on the involvement of book club participants. The participants and I were thrilled to have authors respond directly to us:

Just before the conference I scheduled Google Hangouts on Air with 4 authors and it was such a thrill. I used Twitter to invite them, and email to arrange the schedule and to send my questions ahead of time. Using Google Hangouts with participants taught me that it was too overwhelming to keep the discussion flowing at the same time as managing the technology with multiple speakers, so I chose to just have the author speak with me and to embed the livestream again in the Wordpress blog. I spent an average of 45 minutes on air with each author and my YouTube analytics tell me that author Will Richardson's interview has been viewed the most at 43 times.

Our face-to-face meeting

Nothing brings people together like food so when ECOO organizer Leslie Boerkamp inquired how best to arrange the #BIT15Reads meet-up, I suggested that it should feel like a wine and cheese party….but without corporate sponsorship and with limited timeslots for social events at the conference, I ended up choosing a casual meeting in the main lobby of the convention centre at breakfast time.

We set up a table full of books right next to the coffee station.

I gave away 23 books in an hour with a promise from each person that they would visibly show their reading process and tweet with our hashtag. I took pictures of each one of them and published immediately to Twitter with the conference hashtag. People just couldn't believe that I was giving away free, good books and these were the review copies that I had solicited ahead of time. Afterwards I created a blog post about the experience.

#BIT15Reads branches out

In 2016, #BIT16Reads will ride again and appear in new formats under new names. Ontario educator, Jennifer Casa-Todd, Literacy & Lead Learner for 21C initiative at York Catholic District School Board, has started an online book club about education leadership, using George Couros' book The Innovator's Mindset: Empower Learning, Unleash Talent, and Lead a Culture of Creativity (2015) using the OSSEMOOC platform. Additionally TVO has joined with the Ontario School Library Council to offer two book clubs inside it's online platform called TeachOntario. These book clubs will be run by teacher-librarian Melissa Jensen and myself. At this moment we are celebrating an enthusiastic response from our participants' first week yet we are beginning with the traditional model where a facilitator leads with discussion talking points and stimuli for interaction.

Coming from a museum background, Nina Simon (2010) describes the ultimate design of a participatory model as a way that invites participants to create, remix and redistribute their own content beyond the original intent of the project (p. 3). What keeps me going is to challenge myself to be the change that I want to see i the world of professional learning communities. In other words, by continuing to model my own reading and connections with other texts in online and face-to-face places; that in creating spaces for participation with multiple media types; that a

participatory culture will eventually happen. I'm taking the creation of these new online book clubs as a good sign that it's starting to happen.

Going forward

Each year both organizations, ECOO and Ontario Library Association (OLA) hold well-attended conferences, yet both groups seem largely unaware of each other, which is a missed opportunity. I ask myself why each not-for-profit group wants to keep reinventing the same format of professional development over and over again. It's not that these conferences aren't valuable, but to really make a difference in professional development, these conference formats both lack the same things: longevity, continuity and community. We need to build a participatory culture into our professional development in order to see this trickle down into our schools. If students, like conference attendees, were allowed to attend which sessions they wanted and to engage openly with social media and, how would school change? If conference attendees were encouraged to model their learning process all year long, as students do, wouldn't we grow more from each other's processes? Our entire system of professional thought needs a participatory culture overhaul. There is so much possibility of online professional development that could enhance our rare face-to-face meetings.

During the entirety of #BIT15Reads, I had only one complaint which was couldn't I please schedule a Google Hangout on BC time? The truth is that I couldn't find a way to fit that into my life's schedule. Time is always the greatest hurdle to online networks, it seems. The asynchronous nature just makes it impossible to reach everyone at the same time. Jenkins (2013) says:

> The participation gap is perhaps the most significant barrier and enduring barrier to artistic expression and civic engagement; it is the perception, and often the reality, that even in an increasingly participatory culture not all community members must or even *can* contribute" (p. 14).

That's my biggest takeaway from the experience: even though there are more lurkers than speakers, the data shows that participants were at least actively listening and that makes the experience worth repeating.

References

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Short biography

Alanna King is an agent of change in Ontario's Upper Grand District School Board. She works tirelessly to improve availability and access to resources in all media forms in her secondary school library learning commons. Alanna is proud to represent the Central West region with the Ontario School Library Association and can best be found on Twitter @banana29.