What is a journal club?

Journal clubs are meetings where participants engage in discussion or critical appraisal of research publications and other professional literature in their field. Other names for journal clubs include "discussion groups" or "reading groups" but the purpose remains the same: to keep current on published research, to think critically about the quality of the research, to learn about the research process and to inform decision making. Participating in a journal club, either at a single meeting or a series of these, can be considered a method for learning informally in the workplace, and therefore professional development.

The origins of journal clubs date to back to at least 1875 when physician Sir William Osler introduced the practice at McGill University. The prevalence of journal clubs extends to many sectors, including health practitioners, schools, and other professional arenas.

Some journal clubs, particularly those that have as a purpose the development of critical appraisal skills, focus on a critique of the research methods and analysis, while others put more emphasis on discussion the implications and applications of the study.

Benefits of journal clubs

Participation in journal clubs has been found to have several benefits at the individual, group, and organizational level.

- Journal club as a cost-effective means of participating in professional development
- An opportunity to protect time to engage with the professional literature
- Exposure to new ideas or research methods that can inform, or be integrated into practice
- Using research and discussion to inform decision making
- Improving professional skills by becoming more familiar with particular subject areas, tools or resources
- Increasing awareness of colleagues' interests and perspectives
- An opportunity to connect with colleagues and perhaps a prompt for collaborative action
- Journal clubs can influence decision making at the organizational level, leading to improvement for clients. Impacts can include new initiatives and more capable and knowledgeable staff.

Defining success

To sustain a journal club, it's important to define what purpose the club will serve and what success will look like for the group. This can be revisited as needed. Here are some indicators of the success of your journal club:

- Participants learn something or reflect on an issue that applies to their work
- Discussions are balanced in terms of who participates and the tone of the discussion
- Participants are proactive about bringing ideas and topics for discussion
- Attendees are from different roles, departments or organizations
- Participants learn about research findings or professional approaches that can be directly applied to their work

Sustaining a journal club

The literature on journal clubs suggests several hallmarks of successful clubs. Here are some ways to ensure your journal club is successful:

- Have the discussion during mealtime and/or provide refreshments if possible
- Hold the meeting in a space that is conducive to group interaction (either face-to-face or virtual)
- Have a dedicated coordinator and build a core group of members who are open to exploration of ideas
- Support from the organization's leadership.
- Select readings thoughtfully. Some journal clubs focus on a particular subject, such as an area of program delivery or a particular theoretical underpinning of the field. Others cover a broad range of topics in or related to the area of practice. Journal clubs may select readings that support their group's goals, such understanding the value of their work or staying current with new knowledge.
- Document the readings and discussion (web pages, blogs, wikis, or an intranet). This has may help with prompting further reflection and synthesis; preserving collective knowledge for future reference; record-keeping and evaluation purposes.
- Keep in mind that maintaining a successful journal club requires persistent effort over time![1]

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[1] Adapted from Library Journal Club Network, https://journalclubnetwork.wordpress.com/