Creating a Reading Group in Humanities Commons
Brian Jeffrey Maxson, RSA Discipline Representative
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Humanities Commons (HC) can provide an easy and fun way to create a reading group among colleagues and friends who may not be able to meet in person or who desire the increased flexibility that comes with an asynchronous discussion. In the spring of 2020, a small group of friends experimented with this idea and found it to be both stimulating and enjoyable. This document provides in-depth, step-by-step instructions on how to adopt the method we used, as well as some tips from our first book discussion. If you would like a shorter version of these instructions, please visit the file of “Brief Instructions.” If you are interested in more general instructions related to “groups” on HC, please see https://support.hcommons.org/guides/groups/.

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1. FINDING PARTICIPANTS:

One path to a reading group is to find 4-6 people who share a general interest or simply wish to read something new. This is enough people to keep discussions active and provide different opinions.

A second idea is to create a group of 9-12 people. Each book could have 4-6 active discussants, while the other group members could be inactive for that particular book. This keeps the group active month after month, while allowing individuals to step back here and there when they have a month full of other commitments. The basic group composition of 9-12 people remains constant, even as the specific 4-6 people discussing a given book will be different.

A third idea is to create a larger group of people, to approximate the experience of a roundtable discussion. Five or six people could be specifically selected to discuss a text and then a more open invitation could be created for others to observe the discussion. The moderator could then open the discussion, after a few days of more restricted posts among the initial members, to “audience” members.

The following detailed instructions can apply to groups with 4-6 people or 9-12 people. To make a larger group along the lines of idea three is also possible on HC, but would involve slight changes to the way that the site would need to be built.

2. CHOOSING A BOOK

The key things to consider when picking a book are interest among group members and accessibility to the text. It may be helpful to select a text that one person in the group has previously read, both to verify its quality and its potential for discussion. Alternatively, it can be exciting for an entire group to encounter a book together for the first time.
For groups with members who are quarantined at home, as in the spring 2020, or based far from a major research library, getting some texts can be complicated or impossible. Have members of a discussion verify access to a book before finalizing a selection and making a discussion timeline.

3. SETTING UP A HUMANITIES COMMONS GROUP

The group needs to pick a host who will be in charge of creating and monitoring the discussion on Humanities Commons.

In HC the host will go to their main page. If the host has already created a profile on HC and logged in previously, this page can be accessed by clicking on your profile picture in the top right of your screen. My main page is shown below:

On the left side is a list of items: News Feed, Members, Groups, Sites, etc. Click on “Groups,” and the following page will open:
A group will let the reading discussion have a controlled membership and dedicated space to post comments. Next to the groups heading, click on the button “Create a Group,” and the following page opens:
The Group Name and Description that you enter here will be what people visiting HC will see. For this guide I have entered “Reading Group, Cultural History and the Italian Renaissance,” and a Group Description of “A group that reads and discusses one book each month related to the cultural history of the Italian Renaissance.” After entering the fields click “Create Group and Continue.” The screen below will appear:
Now the host must make decisions about the format for the group. If the group is “public,” then anyone can find the group by searching in HC, join the group, and view its content. A public group is like a webpage. If a group is “private,” then the group will be listed in search results within HC, but people who find the group will need to request to join and then be approved before they can view or post any content. If a group is “hidden,” people will not be able to find the group through searching on HC or see any of the group content. For this manual, my group is a “private group” because I would like interested people to be able to find it, but I also want to have some control over who can join the group and see its content.

The second question on this page pertains to what people admitted to the group can do. Your group can have three different types of members. An “admin” has the ability to access and change all aspects of the group. A “mod” can alter content in the site but cannot alter its basic structure by adding or deleting components. A “member” can only comment upon content that has already been created. If you want all group members to be able to invite others to join the group then select “All group members.” If you would like to restrict who can invite people to join the group then select “group admins and mods only” or “group admins only.” For the reading group I am creating I selected “group admins only” because I don’t expect the group to be that large, and I don’t anticipate an overwhelming number of people to request access.

After I click “Next Step” the following page opens:
On this page the host has options for how visible and easy to find the group will be as well as the ability to set permissions for group members. The top part of this page, “Site,” asks if you would like to use a preexisting URL (that is, web address) or if you would like HC to create a new site for the group. I don’t have an existing site to use and thus I pick “Or, create a new site.”

Now you are asked how visible you want the site to be within search engines. “Public and allow search engines to index this site” means that all search engines, such as Google or Bing, will be able to find the site. “Public but discourage search” means that, although it is theoretically possible for a search engine to locate the site, HC will work behind the scenes to move the group lower in search results. “Visible only to registered uses of HC” will allow people who search in HC to find the site, but external search engines will not be able to find it. “Visible only to registered users of your site” will make the group invisible to anyone who is not already a member of the group. “Visible only to administrators of your site” will restrict the group’s visibility only to members with administrative privileges. For my group I have picked “Visible only to registered users of HC.”

The second half of this page, “Member Options,” looks like the screen shot below:
The first box, “Enable member posting,” allows people in the group to post comments. Because our goal is a reading group where all members contribute their thoughts on a common reading, I have checked this box.

The next options pertain to what you want people added to your group to be able to do. The site itself describes what “Administrator,” “Editor,” “Author,” “Contributor,” and “Subscriber” mean. For a reading group I have picked “Administrator,” for the Default Administrator Role. I have picked “Editor” for the Default Moderator Role. I have picked “Author” for the Default Member Role. Thus, the person setting up the site, the Administrator, will be able to access all features of the site. Moderators will be able to contribute to and manage discussions. Members will be able to write posts but not have to worry about managing anything. A reading group with eight people might have one administrator, two moderators, and five members.

After you have made your selections click “Next Step”: 
HC is letting us know that we have successfully set our preferences for our group members. Click the X to exit:
At this point decisions have to be made about how the group discussion is going to happen. Three basic options are possible.

If we decide to use the “Group Discussion” feature of HC then leave the “Yes, I want this group to have a discussion board” checked. The advantage to using the “group discussion” option is that users will have a “Discussion” tab when they go to the reading discussion site, where they can easily find and add to the book posts. The disadvantage is that users cannot alter their posts once they are posted. Instead, they must request that a group “administrator” alter previous posts (delete them, move them, or split up a long thread).

A different approach is to create a Google doc and then paste the link to that doc in the discussion board. This makes it easy to keep the discussion in one place: all users click the link and add to the file. The disadvantage is that HC will not notify group members when the Google doc is updated—Google itself will notify users. As a result, in my first experiment using Google docs with Humanities Commons I began receiving two different sets of updates: HC was sending updates to my institutional email, while notifications of changes to the Google doc were going to my Gmail account. I resolved that issue but it is something to be aware of.

My suggestion is to uncheck this box and take a different approach (described next). After you have made your choices, click “Next Step”: 
This page allows you to permit your group site to house a shared “doc” file. The advantage of a doc file is that everyone can access, add to, and edit a single shared file. Thus, users’ comments in the doc file can always be edited. When a change is made to the doc then all group members receive a notification from HC. The disadvantage is that unless the doc file is carefully created up front, users can easily become confused and the discussion can become splintered across different places on your discussion site. If you choose to use the “docs” within HC, make sure that the box “Enable Docs for this group” is checked. Also make sure that “Minimum role to associate Docs with this group” is set to “Group member,” so that all group members can participate.

After you have made your decisions click on “Next Step”: 
This page allows you to set a profile picture for your reading group site. If you do not wish to set an image you can click on “Next Step” without doing anything.

I wanted a funny picture for my group, and thus I selected a picture of a sleeping cat in Settignano. This picture will appear on the main page for the group. If you also chose to use a picture, click “Next Step” after your page says “The group profile photo was uploaded successfully.” The following screen will appear:
On this page you can choose who may upload files to the group. I have left this at “Only Group’s Administrators and Moderators.” In general, a reading group probably will not be dealing with files. After you have made your decision click on “Next Step”: 
Here you can pick an image as a heading for your group. This will be the image that people see at the top of the reading group site when they access it in HC. If you would rather not have an image you can click “Next Step.” (I have picked an image of stacks at a research library.) Click “Next Step”:

On this final page you can invite people to join your group. They must all have profiles on HC. Search by their name, select their profile, and when you click “finish” an invitation will go out to them. The following screen will appear:
Click the X, and you now have a group ready for a book discussion on Humanities Commons, with the screen below!
4. READING THE BOOK

My experimental group tried two different approaches to reading a book.

First, group members were provided around two weeks to read a book, during which we had little contact or discussion. Users had the greatest possible flexibility over the allotted two weeks to read and reflect.

In the second approach, we broke the book up into smaller sections with discussions planned for each week over different sections of the book. This provided faster engagement with the book and also deeper engagement with the book’s different sections. The disadvantage was that participation took a bit more time as users were posting on a section of the book at the same time they were reading a new section.

5. DISCUSSING THE BOOK

Consider limiting posts to 150 words or less. Long posts take a long time to write and are difficult and time-consuming to respond to, which may discourage participation.

The discussion specifics will vary depending upon whether your group chose a discussion board, a Google doc link, or the recommended path of the docs feature within HC itself.

Discussion Board: Each user will have a “Discussion” tab. Prior to the discussion the site administrator can create a new topic. Users will be able to click on the topic and reply by inserting their text into a text box and clicking “Submit.”

Google Docs: The site administrator can create a topic under the “Discussion” tab. The title for the topic could be “Discussion Link,” and then insert the link to the Google Doc in the text box itself. Users will then be able to locate and click the link. Google docs automatically saves changes made, so the original link will always take users to the most updated version of the file.

Docs feature within HC: If you followed the instructions provided in #3 (Setting up a Humanities Commons Group) of this manual then the following screen shot will correlate with your own homepage for your reading group. Note that there is no “Discussion” tab because that was disabled during the page setup.
Below the site header is a list of options: Home, Events, Site, etc. Click on “Docs.” The following screen will open:
On this page click on “Create New Doc”:

Insert a title for your “doc.” For this test I have chosen the title “Discussion of Mad Blood Stirring.” There are several more things to do on this page, and thus I scrolled down the page:
In the content box type in how you would like the conversation to start. This can be as simple as “Discussion posts begin here,” or something more elaborate like a short paragraph setting an imaginary scene in which the participants purport to come together to discuss the book. One thing to keep in mind is that with many people contributing to the same doc file it can become confusing to follow who has posted what. Thus, consider typing your name (or a fictional character name...!) before each post.

If you do not wish the other members of the group to be notified of your change you can select “This is a minor edit.” I do want other members to know that I posted as I am excited to read what they have to say! I then scroll further down:
For a reading group there are probably no attachments, so I have skipped the “Add Files” button.

The “Associated Group” button would allow us to share our doc directly with a different group on HC.

The Access arrow has five different questions that we must answer:

For “Who can read this doc?” select “Members of this Reading Group.” You can choose to have the doc more or less widely accessible, but the option “Members...” will keep the doc open to the people in your reading group and closed to people outside of it.

For “Who can edit this doc?” select “Members of this Reading Group.” This will allow members of your group to add their comments to the shared doc.

For “Who can read comments on this doc?” again select “Members of this Reading Group.”

For “Who can post comments on this doc?” select “The Doc author only.” The reason to restrict this to one person is that otherwise editing the shared doc can become very confusing. With this restriction, once users enter the “Docs” tab they will only be able to post by clicking on the doc link and typing in the content box.

For “Who can view the history of this doc?” select “Members of this Reading Group.”

Scroll further down the page:
For a basic reading group the remaining items can be skipped. The Group Folders, Tags, and Parent options all allow for additional organization of the site and its docs. If the reading group begins to have many different docs after many different book discussions then these options can be revisited to help out with organizing the site. For now they were not necessary, so I clicked “Save”: 
After closing the “Success” box, the doc is ready for posting by group members. After clicking on the “doc” tab from the group main page, readers will see the options of “read,” “edit,” and “history.” Each time they will click “edit,” type in their content, click “save” and the change will be saved to the central doc file in HC and all members of the group will receive an email!

6. ENDING THE DISCUSSION

After a discussion has concluded, consider a formal end to the discussion and offering a suggestion for a new book.

If there is interest, consider also working together as a reading group to polish up the doc or Google doc or discussion board posts. Keep the real or fictional names for the posts of each person. The leap from book discussion to literary dialogue is not that far, and a literary dialogue can preserve a record of the conversation for posterity. Particularly noteworthy discussions could perhaps be shared on Humanities Commons with others...!