



BOOKS@WORK

ANNUAL REPORT 2015

Letter to the Books@Work Community

Dear partners, participants, professors, supporters and friends:

In a famous set of lectures at Harvard University,* Italian author Umberto Eco explored the reasons humans read stories:

"To read fiction means to play a game by which we give sense to the immensity of things that happened, are happening, or will happen in the actual world. By reading narrative, we escape the anxiety that attacks us when we try to say something true about the world. This is the consoling function of narrative — the reason people tell stories, and have told stories from the beginning of time...to find a shape, a form, in the turmoil of human experience."

Although we do not limit our reading to fiction at Books@Work, we do in fact limit our reading to narrative. But we didn't start here. Since the program's outset, we have tailored readings to fit the interests of each Books@Work group. But we have tried – and failed – to successfully include non-narrative literature, literature that seeks to teach. It may be strange to open an Annual Report by celebrating a failure, but this observation informs one of our most powerful learnings to date: for Books@Work to achieve its desired outcomes, narrative becomes essential.

Why? The power of Books@Work lies in sharing human narratives that exhort us to examine human relationships. By reading stories, our participants find parallels to their own lives, and find openings and a safe space to tell their own stories. These shared stories – whether occasioned by the book or the discussion – become the foundation for individual reflection, interpersonal connection and collaboration, and open, inclusive organizations.

A few examples of this narrative discovery:

- A group of machinists in a manufacturing plant used the spare prose in Hemingway's Nick Adams tales to explore the "unsaid" stories of everyday life. Said one, "I've been able to solve some of the problems I didn't know were there just by looking past what I was being told by [my colleagues]."

- In a healthcare company, a group reading Rachel Simon's *Riding the Bus with My Sister* examined the parallels between caring for a developmentally-disabled sibling and the patience required to connect with the chronically-ill patients they serve together; and

- A cross-functional group in an industrial company reading Julie Otsuka's *When the Emperor was Divine* considered the human implications of the Japanese internment camps of the 1940s, drawing personal connections to the current refugee crisis in Europe and imagining themselves in similar extreme circumstances.

"True" or otherwise, narrative offers the fundamental human truths that encourage the joint exploration of the divergent realities around the table. Each story connects deeply to a reader's personal experience, providing varied lenses from which to view the characters and the plot. As one participant shared recently, "Even though every one of us had read the same story, none of us had read the same story."

Narrative powerfully provides the canvas to explore these differences, to realize that our own perspectives – as "real" as they may seem – are often different from those of our colleagues. By using stories to explore these differences, we "give shape" to an understanding that others see the world differently, that plural views may be more effective than singular perceptions.

In this Annual Report, we are delighted to share our progress, our learnings and our impact in 2015. But more importantly, we thank you for your support and your partnership on our growth journey. We are honored to be using powerful narrative literature as a bridge across organizational hierarchies, to invite diverse voices and nurture social and intellectual connections that foster the most effective working environments. But we could not do it without you.

Thank you.



Ann Kowal Smith
Founder and Executive Director



Felix M. Brueck
Chairman of the Board

* Umberto Eco, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*, 1992-1993 Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, Harvard University, published in 1994.

What is Books@Work?

Books@Work brings professors into workplaces and community settings to build critical thinking and lifelong learning through the discussion of great literature. Participants challenge assumptions, share their stories, experience mutual recognition and practice critical dialogue, without judgment. Books@Work builds human capacity to imagine, innovate and connect, strengthening a culture of trust, respect and inclusion – at work and in the community.

Since its inception, Books@Work has successfully served employees at all levels in healthcare, distribution, food services, manufacturing, human services, professional services, municipalities, education and non-profit. In a typical three-month program, natural teams or cross-functional groups of colleagues meet weekly with a college professor, to explore narrative literature (long and short fiction, non-fiction, drama, poetry and more).

Through Books@Work, participants bridge economic, educational and cultural divisions, contributing ideas drawn from their life and work experiences and building deeper relationships.

"This program opens your mind to the possibility that there is another way to handle or see things, and that not everybody is the same."

Participant, Hospitality Company

2015 by
the Numbers

40
PROGRAMS

8
STATES

87
PROFESSORS

586
Participants

101
BOOKS

25
COLLEGES

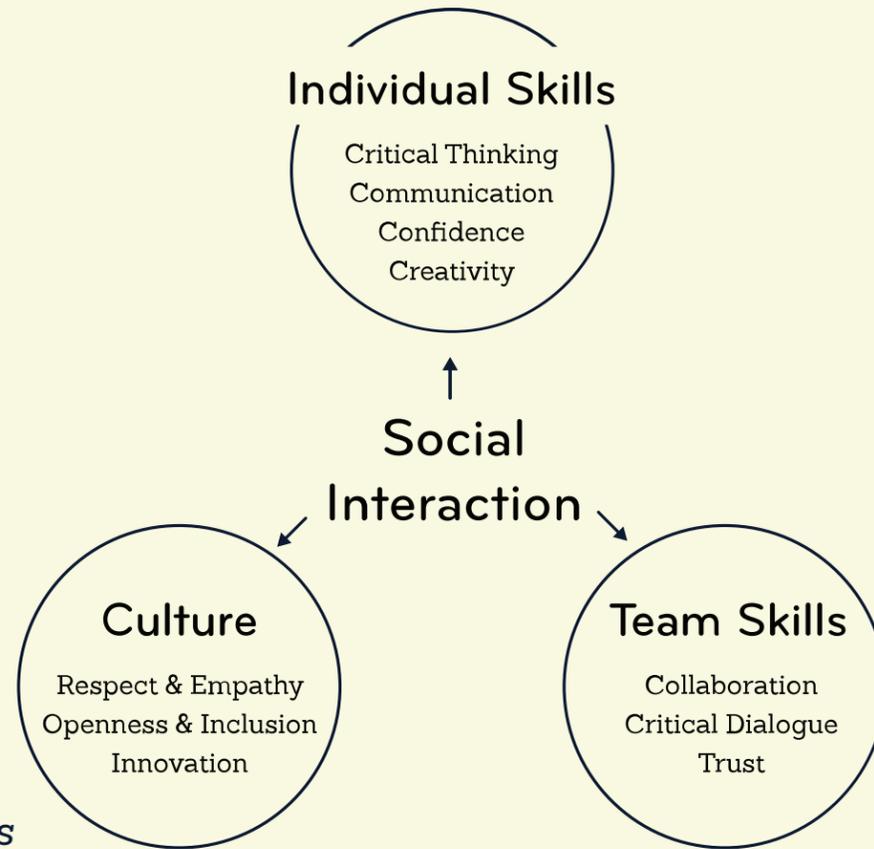
Evidence & Impact

We are deeply committed to measuring our impact. With each program, we survey participants before and after, and we meet with as many participants as we can in one-on-one interviews. The surveys and the interviews (to date, we have nearly 350 transcribed interviews with participants in a wide cross-section of our programs), have yielded powerful insights that help us to understand the “lived experience” of Books@Work and to shape and refine the program.

Evidence from the collected data tells us that through meaningful *social interaction* among the participants, Books@Work

- builds *individual skills*, like critical thinking, communication (especially engaged listening), creativity and confidence
- nurtures *team skills* around trust, collaboration and critical dialogue
- strengthens a *culture* of respect and empathy, openness and inclusion, and innovation.

*Engaging Minds,
Transforming Communities*



At the Individual Level

Books@Work provides important opportunities to reflect, practice workplace skills and nourish creativity.

“When you have intellectual conversations like that, it fills up you and gives you more to give back to the patients. Especially with my team, we deal with people who are very sick. It can be very draining.”

At the Cultural (Organizational) Level

Books@Work creates important organizational networks to navigate the workplace and fosters respect and openness to diverse perspectives.

“Basically, it’s a shift of culture. It used to be very rigid and good or bad, a steady pace. Now, you can get a more open dynamic and people tend to forget about the hierarchy. They’re challenging me and their supervisors, if there’s a better way to do it. People have the courage to challenge.”

At the Team Level

Books@Work fosters high quality connections that break down barriers, nurture trust and foster authentic openness and acceptance.

“Being able to get outside of your role and just be a person, a whole person, and not just a worker... I get to know you better and then when we go into our work situation, I already know you. There’s a higher level of trust because you’re a person now and not just a worker bee.”

Through Social Interaction

Books@Work creates safe spaces for colleagues to interact, to learn together and to encourage meaningful social relationships.

“The great value was the discussions that I had with other people working in the company. Sadly, I think for many of us, depending on which department we work in, we’re somewhat siloed or walled in where we don’t have a lot of exposure with people out of our direct lane on a regular basis. I loved being able to actually have really great conversations with people who work in the company, who I may just see in passing, but have now come to know quite well.”

Research & Contributions

These evidentiary themes link to important correlations already well established in the management literature. Building from the data we’ve gathered to date, our near term goals include using our qualitative evidence to

- lay the groundwork for more refined quantitative measurements to generalize our findings and demonstrate the broader impact of a Books@Work investment
- continue to refine the program to deliver the highest quality
- contribute to a multidisciplinary body of research on organizational learning, workplace culture and personal learning outcomes.

We will continue to interview our participants about Books@Work to keep our finger on the pulse of their experience, keeping it fresh, relevant and alive.

“[Books@Work] helped me with my children and the homework they can’t understand, learning the keys and concepts of the words that are in there. That helped me focus and learn to use the words a little bit better. If you don’t know the key points and the keywords you’re not going to get what the paragraph is actually telling you about.”

Participant, Hospital

Narrative [na-ra-tiv], a telling of some true or fictitious event or connected sequence of events, recounted by a narrator... in which the events are selected and arranged in a particular order.

Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms

Lessons Learned



Books@Work brings people together from all levels and areas of an organization, but it also holds a very special power for natural teams to develop stronger, trust-based personal relationships.



As powerful as Books@Work may be in an organization, there is an equally powerful need in the community. Over the past year, with philanthropic support, we've worked with parents, mentors, young single mothers convicted of minor crimes and veterans.



The literature seminar in the workplace or the community is different than the literature seminar in the college classroom. Our participants are adult learners, and they bring a wealth of knowledge, and life experience, to the seminar.

The oscillation between the text and the shared stories of the participants – in conversation – provides the Books@Work magic.

Narratives that Work

Since our inception, we have read over 250 unique titles across a wide variety of genres. But there are narratives that work particularly well.

Often these fit into genres that serve to open conversations, but also match the interests of the particular group. Importantly, we have found through our research that effective narratives have strong, relatable characters, an identifiable forward movement in the story, and a thorny issue or dilemma with which to grapple.

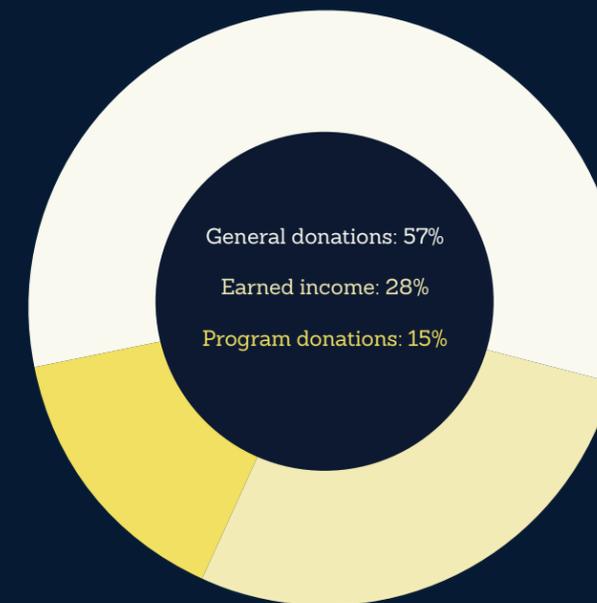
Examples include dystopian novels like Drew Magary's *The Postmortal*, historical novels like Sebastian Barry's *A Long, Long Way*, classics like Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, multicultural voices like Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breakers*, and powerful non-fiction narratives like Isabel Wilkerson's *The Warmth of Other Suns*.

Interestingly, we choose books because they are easy, portable and accessible. But a good narrative can be an oral story, a film, even visual materials. Books@Work is about this narrative, it's only incidentally about the books!

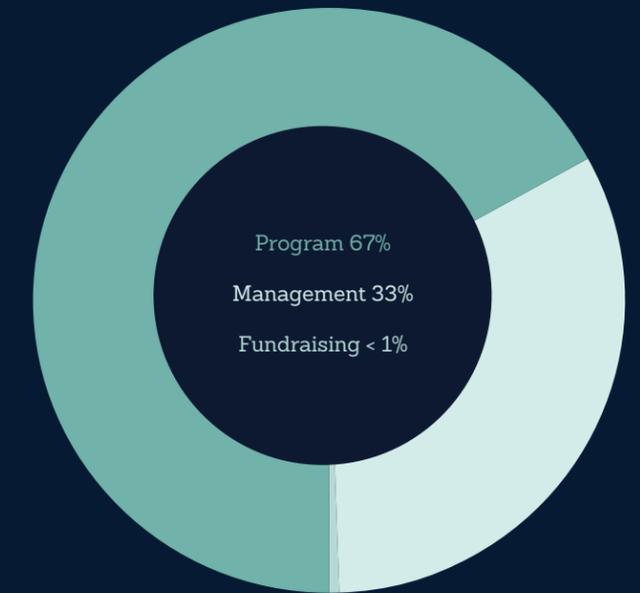
Financials

Total Expenses = \$242,000

Sources of Funds Used



Uses of Funds



“The communal experience is so good because everyone is coming from a different lens. Then when you put all those things together you see this prism of light and experiences. A couple of teammates brought up things that just blew my mind. I thought I understood this, but then once they gave me their perspective, it was like, ‘Wow, I never even thought to look at it that way.’”

Participant, Healthcare Company

THANK YOU

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Our donors, partners, participants and professors give life to Books@Work. Your dedication to lifelong learning helps individuals, families and communities. You are making learning accessible and inspiring. Together, we are empowering participants, and encouraging role models for learning at multiple generations.

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BOOKS@WORK

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